

## PROLOGUE

Broad tendencies in forest fires have long been known. Blazes accelerate amid evergreens, but sputter in leafy stands. They speed naturally downwind and uphill, and grow fiercer and faster in the late afternoon than at night. Such truths have traditionally dictated firefighting tactics. Years of experience and research into fire behavior tell firefighters whether a particular blaze is likely to flare or fizzle, to threaten a town or burn itself out harmlessly. Leaders must anticipate this, and adjust their efforts, like chess pieces, to head off danger.

Fires have many ways of starting. Deep in the woods, where the light does not reach, some small, lifeless, dried out vestige serves as the fuel. All it takes is a bit of carelessness, or worse, some evil, destructive purpose. Sometimes massive forest fires begin from ignorance or indifference. Sometimes they are the result of arson.

Sometimes they are created by both. This is the most dangerous fire—where ignorance, carelessness, and denial are supplemented and exploited by an intense effort to wreak destruction.

As the fire spreads, it leaves death and darkness, even despair, in its wake. The colors of life, of nature, are vanquished in favor of the brittle black of carbon. But the flora is not the only casualty. Fire consumes oxygen—as it proceeds it steals away the very breath of any who get in its way. It does not discriminate. It kills man and woman, young and old, rich and poor, weak and strong, friend and foe. It cares nothing for others. It exists only for itself and it will survive as long as there is a path to conquer, breath to steal, room to spread.

But the world consists of more than just fire and potential fuel. The Earth houses more than merely existence and destruction. There are forces that fight the fires. Whether it is the natural barriers of lakes and rocks or the sheer luck of rain pouring down at the right moment, fires always die. Life has always prevailed in the end. But in the meantime, the greatest of these fires cannot be stopped before they wreak havoc, before they take lives and destroy families.

One such fire was thought to have been extinguished on Halloween night, 1981.

But it had begun to burn again.

The thin man stepped out of the cauldron, staring at Harry . . .

and Harry stared back into the face that had haunted his nightmares

for three years. Whiter than a skull, with wide, livid, scarlet eyes

and a nose that was flat as a snake's with slits for nostrils . . .

Lord Voldemort had risen again.

There is a third way, after nature and luck, that these awful fires can be defeated. There is a grand Muggle expression that directs us, in desperate times, to "fight fire with fire." So that is what we do. A backfire is a smaller, guided fire that, while set purposefully by firefighters, is no less powerful or dangerous than the fire it was created to stop. Wise and experienced firefighters know that starting a backfire can head off and contain a great blaze that otherwise defies nature and fortune, a great fire that seems invincible, that seems as though it will explode and blacken everything in its path.

But this fiery monster is forced to halt if it collides with a backfire. If the position, the power, and the direction are just right, the line of the backfire cannot be breached. Though it is smaller in size, the death, the darkness, and the destruction will stop its ruthless progress. The flames will be contained and then carefully put out by the firefighters. Cool and quiet will return, and new life will emerge, like a phoenix, from the blackness and burning.

Lighting a backfire is an art; it must be set in the path of a moving fire, near enough to be sucked in by the powerful draw of the main fire, but distant enough to prevent damage to those creating it. When the two fires collide, the larger fire's momentum is slowed by the lack of fuel in its path. As well as slowing the advance of the main fire, a backfire can help steer the greater blaze into a lake or river, or clear

smoke away to give firefighters a clear view of the target, sealing the destruction of the angry flames.

So you see, as with magic, there is good fire and bad fire. And as with magic, the fires that are born of ignorance and evil can be met and conquered by those that are set with purpose and guided by compassion and justice.

“You know, of course, that they have called this boy my downfall?”

Voldemort said softly, his red eyes upon Harry, whose scar began to

burn so fiercely that he almost screamed in agony. “You all know

that on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill him.

His mother died in the attempt to save him—and unwittingly provided

him with a protection I admit I had not foreseen . . . I could not touch

the boy.”

Voldemort raised one of his long white fingers and put it very close

to Harry’s cheek.

“His mother left upon him the traces of her sacrifice . . . . This is old

magic, I should have remembered it, I was foolish to overlook

it . . . but no matter. I can touch him now.”

And so we pick up our story now as this terrible conflagration has begun to burn again, now that it has burst forth from where it was thought to be contained for thirteen years. This is the second part of a tale of two extraordinary young women. Two women who never met, who only had two things in common: the fiery hair, and their love for a remarkable boy with green eyes and messy black hair, who would become a force to be reckoned with.

The first woman's triumph has ended. But because of her, that heartless, heinous blaze was contained just long enough for a new one to take her place. Now we return to a world that is once again slowly being engulfed by a horrible and familiar force that leaves only blackness in its wake, and we see that this backfire is about to ignite again.

The love of a mother could only contain this evil the first time. Will the love of a lifetime be enough to extinguish it forever? Will the one with the power of the prophecy be able to fuel that love and with it, douse the flames of evil in the end?

Review this Story/Chapter

## CHAPTER 1

### What Lucius Malfoy Forgot

This was not how it was supposed to go.

The alliance she had so carefully constructed with her youngest brother had fallen apart, and here she was, fending for herself again. The story of my life. He would get his, but for now, she had to hide.

She was crouched, half-sitting in a large cupboard, trying to breathe as quietly as possible, but in the silent space it still sounded like her breaths were amplified. She fell into a bit of a trance as she concentrated solely on breathing and the small piece of wood protruding from the wall that was jabbing her in the kidney. She was startled by the sound of small feet lightly treading on the carpet, and her head jerked toward the noise. She held her breath, even though it couldn't possibly be—No, it couldn't be. . . The steps slowed and grew nearer, finally stopping. The door opened.

“Miss Wheezy?”

“Dobby!”

His big eyes gazed back at her, perplexed. “What is Miss Weezy doing here?”

“Shh!” She heard distant pounding on the stairs, maybe two flights down, but rising. “Quick! Get in here!” She tugged the very confused house-elf into the cupboard with her—not an easy task. She had barely fit before, and adding a friend, small though he was, made it a tight fit indeed. As she heard the loud clomping of footsteps come up the stairs, it was accompanied by voices she knew all too well.

“Where the bloody hell did she go?” That was Ron, the traitor. She could tell by the exasperated tone and the gratuitous swearing.

“Have we checked everywhere?” Leave it to George, the methodical one, to get them back on track.

"It's not like she's still six, for Merlin's sake. There aren't that many places she could be!" And there was Fred, to round out the trio.

"Wish we had a Marauder's Map for this bloody place," Ron whined. Ginny smirked to herself, and Dobby turned to look at her.

"Is Miss hiding from the other Wheezys?" he whispered, no longer puzzled by her odd behavior. She nodded. Dobby nodded back, as if her answer had indicated a particular action he was to take. Ginny tried not to worry, but she was well aware of all the times Dobby had tried to "help" Harry and was not encouraged by his track record.

Dobby went very still for a moment, and then all four Weasleys (those in plain sight and not) heard a violent crash and clanging that sounded suspiciously like the pots and pans had been disturbed in the kitchen. The three boys jumped at the sudden noise, and took off stampeding back down the stairs. Ginny looked down at Dobby with a grin, which he returned. They half-fell out of the cupboard, and Dobby grabbed Ginny's hand as she went to brush off her shorts.

"Miss should follow Dobby. He is knowing a good trick she can play!" Dobby looked predictably excited about potentially being able to help, and Ginny allowed him to lead her away. He took her down the hall, the opposite way from the stairs her brothers had just trampled down. They had almost reached the end of the hall when Dobby stopped Ginny in front of what appeared to be just a plain, empty wall. Ginny watched as the elf pointed to the wall, mumbling something.

Then the tip of his finger glowed briefly and went out, which seemed to bring him some level of satisfaction. Quite unexpectedly, he reached up and unceremoniously grabbed her hand again, yanking it to point at the wall as he had done moments before. He started mumbling again, and this time the tip of her finger glowed before going out. As it did so, Ginny felt a soothing warmth at the end of her finger, but it was gone as quickly as it had come. She turned to the house-elf in curiosity, just as he looked up at her.

"You is ready now." Dobby appeared quite pleased with Ginny, apparently because her finger had glowed. Then more excited: "The big Wheezys will not be following Miss into here!" And with that he

took off into the wall, as if it were the entrance to Platform 93/4. Ginny stood there, struck dumb, until a small hand reached out and yanked her through the wall as well.

Once she had decided that Dobby had indeed pulled her through a wall, and that she had made it to the other side in one piece, she chuckled. The “big Wheezys.” He wasn’t kidding. As far as Ginny was concerned her brothers were obnoxiously tall compared to her newly broken 5’5”. The twins stood at a respectable six feet, while Ron towered at what must have been 6’3”. The twins had filled out more than Ron, but Ginny was not excited about the prospect of wrestling her youngest brother once his muscles finally caught up with his height. He could stay lanky for as long as he liked, thank you very much.

Ginny followed Dobby down what was obviously a shortcut for house-elves, seeing as she had to bend down to walk through it. They went down a couple flights of mini steps, until they had nearly reached the end. Ginny had a hunch it opened to the kitchen. Dobby stopped and turned.

“Harry Potter’s Wheezy is looking for Miss.” Wow, he’s good. Probably has some special elf magic that lets him know everything that goes on in the house. Yes, Ron would get what was coming to him. She smiled in a way that would have made even Fred and George cringe with dread.

“I don’t want him to find me. Can you help me?” Such a helpful little guy, she thought bemusedly. Dobby seemed to understand.

“Follow what Dobby is doing, and be copying, okay?” He turned gleefully toward the entrance to the kitchen. Ginny stopped, and frantically pulled him back.

“But Dobby, I can’t do magic outside of Hogwarts! I’ll get in trouble! Harry almost got expelled last year, and he was protecting himself!” Ginny’s expression drooped as she pondered the loss of her sweet, sweet revenge. But, as always, Dobby remained undaunted.

“Miss is not using wizard wand so Miss is not getting caught!”

“Dobby, are you sure?” Ginny remained skeptical about the probability of not getting caught; for the moment, she brushed aside even exploring the notion of performing wandless magic on her own. . . In a secret passage. . .of the bloody Black family mansion. . .with Dobby.

His cheerfulness would not be repressed.

“Of course I is sure, Miss!”

Ginny decided that if Dobby was this confident, who was she to ruin their fun? Besides, the concern about getting in trouble assumed she could even do wandless magic in the first place. She nodded and followed Dobby to the wall that presumably led into the kitchen. She could hear her brothers still looking for her and talking to each other. Dobby waived his hand over part of the wall and it slowly turned into a liquid-like substance that—Ginny gasped—allowed her to see right into the kitchen! It was like a liquid window and she strongly suspected that the viewing only went one way.

“This is brilliant, Dobby!” she whispered. He beamed. “What do we do next?”

Dobby turned back toward the liquid window, pointing at something in the kitchen. Ginny soon discovered that he had been pointing at a banana, because as he began to move his hand, a banana rose up off the fruit rack and was soon floating in the direction of her unsuspecting brothers. A flick of his wrist sent the banana flying into the back of Ron’s head.

Ginny covered her mouth to hide her burst of laughter as Ron twisted around, holding his head. “What the bloody hell was that?”

The twins were doubled over with laughter. Dobby turned back to Ginny.

“Try, Miss.”



She beamed in response. If this worked, her entire summer would be infinitely better. "All right."

Dobby nodded happily and moved a bit to let Ginny get closer to the window. She had no idea what she was supposed to be doing. Dobby hadn't even said an incantation. Whatever. Here goes nothing.

She pointed her finger at a big pot lying upside down on the table and concentrated very hard on the mental image of it lifting off the rough, wooden surface. She faltered a bit when she felt something strange and warm, but not unpleasant, rising in her gut. She focused on the pot once more, and tried again, steadying herself as the warmth rose up through her chest and shoulders, and out to her fingertips. Slowly, to her shock and surprise, the pot began to hover above the table. Ron was still ranting and raving about the banana, so it took a moment for one of the twins to notice a big metal pot hanging upside down in the air.

"Didn't we have this place exorcized last year?" Fred asked, tilted his head to watch the floating objects curiously.

"Course we did. It was the first thing Dad did," George said, looking around to trying to spot someone with a wand. Only he never would, Ginny thought gleefully, because I am in a hidden house-elf tunnel. Awesome.

Gaining confidence after her initial accomplishment, Ginny grew more bold. Slowly swinging her hand from side to side, the pot began moving in a parallel motion. Fred and Ron's eyes were wide, staring, while George began moving around trying to find a source. She started moving her hand in all different directions, flinging the pot around so that her brothers had to dodge and duck to avoid getting hit. Enjoying herself to the utmost, she prepared for her grand finale.

"This is what you get for double crossing your sister!" she yelled, plunking the pot down, straight onto Ron's head. The twins quickly broke out of their shock and groaned.

"She beat us back to the safe room!" Fred said as Ron moaned on the ground, rubbing his head.

“What? Does she have an invisibility cloak?” George asked, now shooting random spells around in an attempt to locate her.

“Hardly,” Ginny said, taking the opportunity to jump out of her hiding place and into view, laughing her head off. “I’m just more clever than you are.”

“Did you know there was a secret passage there?” Fred asked George, poking the wall with his wand. They couldn’t seem to enter it, which was very gratifying for Ginny, who was still gloating.

“I hate losing to Ginny,” George muttered.

“That’s why we made the pact with Ron,” Fred said, waving a hand in the tall boy’s direction, where he still lay looking pathetic.

“Didn’t seem to help,” George noted.

“What pact?” Ginny asked, eyes narrowed.

“The Never-Let-Ginny-Win-Even-If-It-Means-We-All-Have-To-Work-Together Pact,” Fred said. “Obviously.”

“Charlie was a charter member,” George added.

“Clearly,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes and finally taking enough pity on Ron to take the pot off his head and ask, “You learned your lesson about ganging up against me?”

“I learned we need more help,” Ron said, scowling playfully at her.

“How in the name of Agrippa did you do that, anyway?” Fred asked. “Or should we be expecting an owl from the Ministry?”

“I’m sneaky. And I had a bit of help from Dobby.” Ginny smiled impishly. She turned and looked triumphantly at Ron.

“House-elves,” George said thoughtfully. “You might be onto something there.”

"No business," Ron said, cutting him off. "You won't give me free things, so I refuse to let you work around me." Ron looked satisfied with his logic before his face became eager.. "You lot want to play some chess?"

Ginny and the twins agreed, and the three boys headed to one of the parlors. Ginny stayed in the kitchen, and when she was alone, turned back to the wall she had jumped out of a few minutes before. She pointed at it and, once she saw that her finger went right through the wall, shoved her head through to find Dobby waiting with his usual smile.

"Thanks for all your help, Dobby."

"I is happy to be helping. Miss and her Wheezys is liking some pumpkin juice?"

"That would be great, Dobby. I promise, when Mum gets back, I'll have her knit you another jumper like the one Ron gave you." Dobby looked like he might burst for happiness.

"Oh! Miss is the kindest of all witches! Dobby knew that Miss was kind and brave for going to save Harry Potter's godfather, but now Miss is being so kind to Dobby too!"

Giving Dobby clothes was hardly the kindest thing in the world that she could do, especially since she was just going to be asking her mother for the jumper, but she supposed that after working for the Malfoys for so long, it seemed like a lot to Dobby. But before she could respond to Dobby, he snapped his fingers and disappeared. She pulled her head out of the wall and went to find her brothers.

"Deigned to join us, oh hide-and-seek champion?" Fred asked when she entered the living room.

She grinned. "Just because I'm cleverer than you is no reason to be bitter."

"I don't know about cleverer. You may just be a cheater," George said without looking up from his chess game against Ron.

"Weren't you the ones who told me 'cheating' was just another way of showing that you really care?" Ginny asked.

"Only if you aren't caught," Fred said.

George nodded. "Yep. Being caught cheating means that you did something wrong. And stupid."

"You're not supposed to cheat against your brothers anyway," Ron piped in, taking George's angry little knight from the table.

"Exactly!" the twins said together.

"You all did. You weren't supposed to form teams."

"We weren't a team, just co-signers of a pact."

Ginny grinned and went to relax on the now-clean and comfy couch on the side of the room, reveling in her victory. George and Ron went back to their game with renewed interest, racing through moves in an attempt to offset the other. George was the only person in the world who could even challenge Ron at chess anymore.

Fred took advantage of their distraction to sit next to her, whispering in her ear, "You better believe we're going to make you tell us what you did today."

Ginny laughed. "I beat you. It's not that hard to believe. I've been doing it for years."

"Where were you hiding?"

"No. I don't think I should tell you just yet."

"Ginny," Fred said, glaring at her. She'd dealt with enough brothers her whole life to know that Fred wouldn't actually do anything.

“I’ll tell you later,” she relented. “It’s too cool to just blurt out without some anticipation.”

Always a proponent of well-played theatrics, Fred accepted her offer with a hand shake and then went to harass both George and Ron about their sloppy play, grabbing a glass of pumpkin juice as he went. Apparently Dobby had already been through here.

It was late June, only a week since they had left Harry at King’s Cross. The word from Dumbledore was that Harry could join them in another week. Ginny had insisted that they keep the state of the house a secret until he arrived, since she figured he could probably use a pleasant surprise after everything that had happened. She knew he couldn’t be overjoyed at the prospect of returning to Grimmauld Place at all, let alone one without Sirius. Of course, if all went as planned, Harry wouldn’t have to be at Grimmauld Place for very long.

They had been back from school for barely a day when she decided that she couldn’t take it anymore. Despite the very best efforts of the tidy Mrs. Weasley and her brood of slave-driven children, Grimmauld Place still looked like a dark, dank, unpleasant prison instead of a home.

Whenever she looked at the house, she was always reminded of the gaunt, frustrated version of Sirius as she first knew him, rather than the exuberant man he sometimes became around Harry. She didn’t want that, partially for Harry’s sake, but mostly because she thought Sirius would have liked to see the foulness and the darkness extinguished.

A pang went through her as she thought of the man who had owned this home. No matter how many games she and her brothers played, no matter how many fresh-air charms her mother cast, the place still ached of Sirius Black, who had been a force of nature.

And thinking of Sirius always made Ginny think of Harry’s face at King’s Cross station as he stood before Moody, Remus, and his relatives, the broken look he tried to hide when everyone finally rallied to protect him from his uncle. And all he wanted was Sirius.

To avoid thinking about that, Ginny had plunged into her summer assignments, including some slightly overzealous O.W.L. preparation, which pleased her parents, who had too much to deal with already from their prat-of-a-son Percy and the weekly healer check-ups Ron still had to endure because of their stint at the Ministry.

A week ago, the day after they came home, Mrs. Weasley had sat both Ginny and Ron down for a conversation about their choices.

"I don't know what you were thinking, running off to the Ministry without telling anyone!" Mrs. Weasley had said.

Ron had folded his arms. "We told Snape."

"Then you ran off on your own!" Mrs. Weasley said.

"Harry needed our help," Ginny said, staring at her mum and then her dad. "So we went."

"You should have trusted the professors to do something!" Mrs. Weasley insisted.

"Professor McGonagall was in the hospital. Dumbledore was chased out of school. Who did you want us to go to? Umbridge?" Ginny asked, shaking her head. "Like Ron said, Harry told Snape."

"You should have known we'd take care of it," Mr. Weasley said sadly. "Didn't you think we trusted Harry?"

While Mrs Weasley's anger was loud and scary, it was Mr. Weasley's disappointment all the children really feared. It had made Ginny cringe that first day.

"Harry wasn't going to wait, and we weren't going to let him go alone," Ron said.

Despite a mighty row that threatened to start when their mother's face turned a certain shade of red, both Ron and Ginny managed to escape punishment when their father had lightly asked to speak to their mother alone. He was proud of their choice, whether he said so or not,

and gave them both a hug that night before they left the room. A hug from her dad always made Ginny feel better.

“Still can’t believe you managed to dodge Mum’s wrath after that student,” Fred said now, sitting in the living room with Ron and Ginny after the hide-and-seek game.

“Mum would’ve hung us by our thumbs,” George agreed.

“Nah. She’d be reminded that you could’ve died, and probably cried,” Ginny said, taking a bite of her biscuit.

“She must know that I wouldn’t let Harry go alone,” Ron said, taking the white queen with his rook. The fading scars on his forearms stood out against his pale skin.

“Course you wouldn’t,” George said. “Dad knows that. After all the times Harry’s saved all your lives, even Mum understands.”

“Wish we could’ve gone with you, though,” Fred said, relaxing back in his seat beside Ginny. “Could’ve helped.”

Which was true, and it was also true that Harry probably would have liked the twins with him more than Ginny, Luna, and Neville. But that was too bad, because they were the ones that had been ready and willing. And whether Harry knew it or not, Ginny had wanted to go for more reasons than just to help him; she had liked Sirius Black. Not in a creepy way, certainly not like she liked Harry, but as a strange sort of uncle. She’d heard stories about him her whole life, after all, and then he was found innocent and she had lived in his home.

Strange as it seemed, she had felt like Sirius had understood the darkest parts of herself, even though they never really talked about them. They had a lot in common that neither one acknowledged aloud, the kinship of those who understood being a prisoner—of Azkaban and of their own bodies.

As much as she liked her school friends Andy McGrath and Kerney Scott, she knew that they would never really understand what she’d

been through. It might help if she told them about her first year experience, of course, but that was another issue all together.

At any rate, the summer had begun with Ginny bored, without company, and suppressing any sadness about Sirius's death; so she had picked up a project to occupy her time: she was determined to exorcise the Darkness from the house.

Knowing her mother and she were no match for the work, she'd approached Dumbledore after a meeting of the Order on the second day of break. Or rather, she'd hidden outside the kitchen door at Grimmauld Place until the meeting adjourned, and then she'd leaped up as he left the room.

"Headmaster Dumbledore?" she had called out.

The old man paused and smiled at her, as if the people streaming past him with grave expressions and new worry lines were from a different planet.

"Miss Weasley, it's rather late," the professor said quietly. Luckily, Ginny's mother made a habit of cleaning up after the meetings while her dad chatted with Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"I know that, sir, but I wanted to ask you a favor," she said, keeping her brown eyes locked on his. Mundungus scooted around them and slipped out the door. The wiry man always moved suspiciously.

Dumbledore nodded. "Something to do with your plans for next year?"

"Oh. No, actually," Ginny said, thinking of the stacks of books in her room and the spells she'd learned that day. "I was hoping that I could enlist the help of Dobby in cleaning up this house a bit."

"A cleaning favor?" Dumbledore asked, eyebrows raised.

"Well, Kreacher's useless, and Sirius is gone, and I didn't want Harry having to come here and see this place after staying with his relatives," Ginny said, nodding at the black curtains. "And since



Dobby adores Harry, I thought he might like the assignment. I imagine Hogwarts is rather boring during the summer holiday.”

He smiled back her, and Ginny had to admit that she always liked the way he looked at her as if they shared a private cosmic joke of some type. They weren’t strangers, anyhow. She’d had more than her share of private conversations with the headmaster at Hogwarts and was probably as familiar with his office as any student except Harry, who pulled more headmaster-worthy stunts than the twins.

“I think Dobby would feel honored to be asked to assist with such a favor, and his friend Winky has been looking for a home to work in. She’s unhappy at Hogwarts. Shall I ask if she would like to join him?” Dumbledore asked.

“That’d be great.” Ginny beamed in satisfaction. “Do you think they can wage war properly on this old place?”

“Elf magic is quite powerful in its own way. I believe it will be a match for the evil that dwells in this house.” His eyes sparkled.

“Thanks, Professor. I think Sirius and Harry would both appreciate it.”

Dumbledore’s eyes saddened ever so slightly. “Perhaps. Is there anything else you wish to ask me?”

“Actually, yes.” She paused, glancing at the empty kitchen. Tonks and Remus were in the study at the end of the hall, and no one else was in sight. “This is about school. I don’t know if Professor McGonagall mentioned this to you, but I asked her before everything happened if it might be okay if I took a few of my O.W.L.s early.”

She looked slightly anxious, unconsciously biting her bottom lip. Dumbledore nodded a few times.

“She has mentioned it. Transfiguration, Potions, and Defense Against the Dark Arts, correct?”

“Yes.”

"I've looked over your records. You have exceptional marks. But what you're asking is very complicated and very rare."

"I know," Ginny said. She had prepared a speech for exactly this moment, winning him over to her cause, and now she completely forgot it. "And I know that it would take some extra effort on the part of the Ministry, but I am willing to do all of the studying on my own time."

"That is not the issue, Miss Weasley. The exams must be taken at the end of the fifth year of Hogwarts because without five years of training, students cannot pass the exams. Even the smartest and most powerful students do not take the exams early," he said simply.

"I know," Ginny said. "But I am a good student, and school is—" She paused, trying to articulate what she meant. "Those classes are easy for me. They just are. Knowing why I need to add beetle wings to potions with unicorn hair makes sense to me really quickly. Writing an essay about it feels pointless. Sitting through a year of lessons when I could take the exams early seems equally pointless. And after everything that happened at the Department of Mysteries, I'm even more convinced that I could be a better help if I could just study more."

Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled in that all-knowing way, which could be either very good or very bad. Hopefully he didn't find her request childishly amusing or anything.

"I've spoken with your professors. Arranging to take three O.W.L.s early would be impossible," he said, and her heart dropped. "Despite your outstanding marks, we cannot approve such a choice. However, your professors are willing to discuss potential extra credit study projects."

Ginny tried not to let her disappointment show on her face. She had wanted to move ahead a year, not further expand the slow-paced curriculum, but she knew when to admit defeat. If Dumbledore himself said it wasn't possible, it wasn't.

"What sort of projects?" Ginny asked.

“Your professors will discuss the details with you on your first day of classes.”

Ginny nodded. “Thank you, sir. I appreciate you looking into it.”

“I know this is less than you wanted, Miss Weasley, but it is for the best,” he said.

How many times had he said those words to students? Ginny wondered. How many times had he been lying?

She extended her hand to shake his. She hoped her small smile conveyed gratitude. “I’ll look forward to talking to the professors.”

His hands were soft and warm, fingers able to wrap all the way around her hand. “If that concludes our business, I believe it would be best for us both to go to bed.”

“Yes. Good night, Professor Dumbledore.”

“Good night, Miss Weasley.” And that was that.

She’d made it halfway up the stairs in a haze of conflicting emotions and thoughts—trying to convince herself that this would be a good thing—when she spotted her older brother Bill leaning against the wall on the landing.

“Hey there,” he said too-casually.

She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. “How much did you hear?”

“Suspicious little thing, aren’t you?” he said affectionately, watching her ascend the stairs to join him on the landing.

“You’re avoiding the question,” she pointed out. He was over a decade older than her, but he had never learned to hide his feelings.

“You could have just sent him an owl,” Bill said.

"I can't owl anyone from this house," she said. "And my brothers who can leave this house are all too nosey to mail something for me without reading it."

"I'm hurt," Bill said, shaking his head, which caused his earring to sway.

"No, you're not," Ginny said, putting her hair up into a ponytail. "You're the one that told me to never commit anything to writing that I could memorize or convey aloud."

"Who knew you actually listened to me?"

She waved a hand dismissively. "I always listen to you. You're sneakier than the twins when you want to be."

He chuckled. "Glad to know I'm appreciated."

"Constantly," she said. "So what'll it cost me to keep you from telling Mum that I hijacked the headmaster to ask him if I could take my O.W.L.s early?"

"A favor," he said with a wicked grin. "And no blackmailing me for a least a decade."

"That's a laugh," Ginny said. "Her disapproval isn't worth a decade."

"Fine, I'll just let Mum know that even though the headmaster looked so terribly tired as he was leaving, you—"

"Hold on!" she said, grabbing his arm as he walked past. "How about no blackmailing you about girls for the next ten years? Especially since you and your French girlfriend seem pretty serious."

His eyes widened. "How did you know about Fleur?"

"Bill, you underestimate me," she said, shaking her head.

He mock-glared. "I was planning to introduce her to Mum in August anyway."

"Before or after you tell her that Fleur is seven years younger than you?" Ginny asked, eyes wide and innocent. Her coolest brother crossed his arms.

"After I plan on telling Mum that her little girl is still suffering from the stress of her battle at the Ministry, and is suffering under the delusion that she needs to take her O.W.L.s early in order to help fight more Death Eaters. Oh, wait, Mum doesn't know you plan to join the Order and fight Voldemort? Oops."

"So we're at an impasse."

"You're not allowed to blackmail me into keeping my blackmail quiet," he said.

"Of course I am," Ginny replied lightly. "That's the definition of an impasse."

Bill rolled his eyes. "You'd have gotten Os on all of those O.W.L.s."

"I am genius," Ginny said, making him grin. "You know the only reason I wanted to do it in the first place was to beat you. I couldn't do better than your twelve O.W.L.s, so I wanted to take them early."

"If that were true instead of a vicious lie you created that you could tell Mum to make her blame me, you wouldn't have kept the whole thing a secret," Bill pointed out.

"Aw. You're so smart," Ginny said, hugging him. "That's why you're my favorite brother."

"Liar," Bill said, hugging her back. "Owl me if you need any pointers about your projects, you manipulative genius."

"I will. Charlie's mean, the twins were academically challenged, and Ron's trying to save the world. Process of elimination leaves you as my inspiration," Ginny said.

“You’re too sweet,” Bill said, heading up the stairs to his usual room. “You still owe me a favor.”

“Within reason,” she hedged.

“That’s hardly a qualifier. Reasonable for you includes storming into the most secure branch in the Ministry and fighting Death Eaters,” he said. She laughed and waved good night. Sometimes it was fun having so many brothers.

The next morning—though it would soon be afternoon—Ginny went downstairs to find her mother already making lunch and Remus reading the paper. Seeing her, Remus looked up from his Daily Prophet and said, “I hear we’ll be receiving some guests this afternoon.”

“That’s the plan,” Ginny replied, dumping herself onto a chair and stifling a yawn. “Do you lot ever sleep?”

“Of course we do,” Mrs. Weasley answered, coming over to the table with plates full of food and setting them down in front of her daughter and the werewolf. “We’re just not lazy like you and your brother.”

“I’m hardly like Ron. He’d sleep through the whole holiday if you’d let him.” Ginny immediately snatched a couple of pancakes. Her mother’s food really was amazing.

Remus chuckled at this, but his smile did not quite reach his eyes. “I could too, when I was sixteen.”

Ginny smiled.

Just then, the fireplace swirled green and two house-elves trotted out into the kitchen. Dobby spotted Ginny and perked up at seeing someone he recognized. Winky, as always, looked like she was trying to disappear.

Dobby's enthusiasm made up for his companion's lack. "Oh, it is Miss Wheezy! Dobby is so happy to see her! Dobby is missing her in the summer when she is away and cannot see him in the kitchens!"

At this, Remus let out a bark of laughter, which was followed by Mrs. Weasley glaring at Ginny, who ignored her and glared at Remus. Thanks for the help, mister. Remus tried to hide his laugh in a fake cough, but it was a very poor attempt at a cover. Either he was out of practice or he hadn't been very good at bullshitting or getting out of trouble in school. Nah, that was probably Sirius, she thought. Or Harry's dad.

"You go to see him in the kitchens? Merlin knows I've had to send howlers on account of your brothers. Now I'll have to send them for you, too?"

Dobby looked back and forth between the three humans, and Winky looked anxious at all the loud noise.

Ginny was relatively unfazed by this threat. She'd never been caught breaking the rules before—Well, okay. A couple of times for some small infractions, but she'd been young and inexperienced at rule-breaking then. Fred and George had taught her a lot through their mistakes—and she was quite used to hearing her mother's raised voice by now. Yet another advantage to growing up with the twins. She turned her head so her mother wouldn't see her smirk at that thought. She turned back to Dobby.

"Thanks for coming, Dobby. This is Remus." She indicated her old Defense professor. "He went to Hogwarts a long time ago." Remus smiled and nodded, while Dobby plunged into a bow. She turned to her mother. "And this is my mum." Dobby bowed again, and Mrs. Weasley smiled. Ginny tilted her head to get a better view of Winky.

"Hi Winky! Thanks for helping Dobby with the house." Winky looked up, and for the first time looked sober enough not to dissolve into tears at the mere mention of serving someone who wasn't Barty Crouch. Winky, still obviously nervous, gave a small curtsy.

"I is happy to be helping in a proper house again, Miss." The little wreck of an elf didn't quite smile, but Ginny was heartened nonetheless by the fact that Winky finally appeared to be moving on from her previous master.

"Well, I was hoping that you could help spruce the place up a bit. Harry will be coming in a few days, and I think it would cheer him up if it wasn't so...dark." She paused. "You wouldn't have to cook, though, 'cause Mum likes to do that, but cleaning would be a huge help." Dobby beamed in his typical manner, and Winky smiled at last.

"We is going to make the house like new for Harry Potter, for he is the kindest of all wizards and witches."

Remus smiled with amusement, but the elves didn't seem to notice.

"Thanks, Dobby. Let me or Mum know if you need anything, okay?"

Dobby had bowed again and Winky curtsied again behind him.

"Yes, Miss, we will." Winky nodded in agreement with Dobby's reply. With that cheerful response, they snapped their fingers and disappeared.

"Is that what you meant about visitors?" Mrs. Weasley asked, eyes wide.

Ginny nodded. "I asked Professor Dumbledore if they could come over to help clean up the house. I know we did a lot last summer, but I thought it'd be nice for Harry if—"

"It was a wonderful idea," Mrs. Weasley said, eyes nearly brimming over with tears. As if to stave off the inevitable, her mother piled pancakes onto Ginny's plate. "A wonderful idea."

Trying to ignore her mother's sappy support, Ginny said, "I wonder how long it will take them."



“I wouldn’t expect a miracle over night, although house-elves can do some pretty amazing things,” Remus replied. He turned back to his newspaper.

Remus wasn’t kidding. By the next morning there had been a dramatic improvement in the house’s interior and frankly the air itself seemed cleaner and purer. House-elves are brilliant, Ginny thought to herself. The kitchen especially looked like a completely different place. Mum had been delighted at the transformation, and in gratitude, had forged a compromise with Dobby and Winky: If they let her do the cooking, she would let them clean up afterwards. Ron voiced his opinion that they were all nutters.

At the rate Dobby and Winky were going, the house would look completely different by the time Harry arrived. Ginny thought their progress might have been even faster, but they likely had to account for Kreacher’s demented efforts to thwart them at every turn. One obstacle that remained, however, was the menacing portrait of Mrs. Black that hung in the front hall.

Well, that could be dealt with later, Ginny thought, coming back to the reality of George losing to Ron at chess while Fred looked on, pumpkin juice in hand. The twins were visiting for the next few days, which was a treat, and she planned to enjoy every moment. Maybe she could beat them in a couple more games of hide and seek.

The night after they’d played the game, Ginny jerked awake and sat up in bed.

All of her extremities were tingling with energy. Odd. The clock on the wall said it was nearly three in the morning, but Ginny felt wide-awake. In fact, she felt like she could fly to France and back a couple of times with the adrenaline pouring through her.

It was strange. She hadn’t been having a nightmare, just a normal dream. And she wasn’t feeling frightened or startled, just hyper-aware and energized.

Shaking her limbs and stretching her toes and fingers, Ginny decided the best thing to do would be to walk around a bit. Go to the kitchen

and grab a glass of water. She stole quietly down the stairs, past the curtains that concealed the grotesque countenance of Sirius's mother, and into the kitchen. There was no Order meeting tonight, and the house was eerily silent. She finished her water, put her glass in the sink, and left the kitchen to return to bed, still feeling hyper-attentive.

She slowed her pace as she approached the front hall—she could hear someone whispering or mumbling up ahead. As she neared the portrait of Mrs. Black, she was astonished to find the curtains wide open. It was a slightly disarming experience because Ginny had never seen the portrait open without hearing the accompanying screeches and shrieks.

Ginny stopped about three feet from the portrait and the whispering ceased. She made eye contact with the nasty old woman, who peered back at her suspiciously through squinted, hate-filled eyes. She expected Kreacher to come stalking by any second. Foul little monster.

"I know what you're doing, you little blood traitor," Mrs. Black accused, still whispering. It was decidedly odd to hear her voice when it wasn't screaming like a banshee. Ginny refused to be intimidated by the revolting and condescending creature before her.

"Cleaning up your house to make it livable? Having fun? Studying? I'm doing a lot of things. You'll have to specify," Ginny said quietly. She was wide-awake by this point, listless and full of unexpected energy.

"Oh, I don't mean bringing those disloyal little creatures to desecrate my house."

"It's not your house. It's Sirius's house," Ginny corrected.

"As long as I adorn these walls, it will remain the house of the Blacks. Not of bastard children who shame the race into which they were born."

By the reference to "children" instead of "child," Ginny figured she was having a go at Harry as well as Sirius. Ginny had already been

geared up for a fight. This would be a good (if futile) way to expend some energy.

“We’re going to paint the living room red and gold,” Ginny said with a smile. “And sell those jewels in the cabinets to pay for new furniture to replace this old stuff.”

She tapped her foot against the dark, wooden chest.

“The antiques of the Blacks—”

“Are uncomfortable and dated,” Ginny goaded.

But Mrs. Black—cranky, cantankerous, screechy Mrs. Black—wouldn’t rise to the bait. In fact, the portrait seemed to settle back into her seat looking as smug, arrogant, and evil as Ginny had ever seen her.

“You don’t even know what’s happening to you,” Mrs. Black said.

“And you don’t seem to realize you’re a portrait of a dead woman.”

“Your magic is leaking out of you and into these walls. That little elf unlocked you,” the lady said, sneering. “I can feel it.”

“You cannot you dirty, old liar,” Ginny said, shaking her head.

“My treacherous son was a fool to bring you here. More foolish still to trust the bastard child of his best friend around you. He deserved his death,” Mrs. Black said. Surges of grief and anger made Ginny feel like she was burning inside, and bubbling energy spread from her stomach through her arms and legs, making them tingle even more.

“You never deserved to be his mother, Walburga Black. It was your generation that ruined your entire family. Both sons dead. Nieces scorned. You’re pathetic.” Ginny was a bit shocked by how coldly and calmly she said these words; Weasleys were not generally the most emotionally restrained people the world had ever seen, and she was no exception. Yelling fights between her and her brothers and mother

was common place in her childhood, but the spreading energy in her body made her feel powerful, undefeatable.

“You don’t even know who you are,” Mrs. Black answered, her tone increasing in malice as she noticed the smirk flash across Ginny’s countenance. “Or how the words you speak are not your own. You’re noting more than a little Muggle-loving whore that they use as they please.”

The sensation in her body was growing stronger, and if she hadn’t been engaged in a fight with a painting, she may have paused to think about what the hell was happening. But as it stood, she refused to break eye contact with Mrs. Black.

“I know you, Ginevra Weasley.” The reference to her possession and struggle with Voldemort made the warmth burn within her now, filling her gut and rising through her chest as the demented woman carried on. Her fists were clenched at her sides as she fought to keep control. “Darkness lives in you, yet you try to fight it. Sirius fought it, the fool, and you see what became of him? Killed by his betters. The same will happen to you and that menace Harry Potter.”

“Stop speaking!” Ginny shouted. As the words spewed out, Ginny felt the burning power within her explode, making her skin flicker with a strange glow, then an intense glow that turned into a bright flash and went out. It was pitch black again and—

**BANG!**

The life-size portrait slammed back against the wall, shaking the very foundation of the house. On impact, the painting went black and the frame looked singed, and when the image of Mrs. Black returned, though her mouth moved, words could not be heard. Increasingly panicked, the painted figure began to flail about, and it was terrible to watch, no matter how angry Ginny had been a moment ago, to see a person so desperate to speak be silenced.

To have to watch blood traitors and Muggle-borns take over her house and be unable to voice her complaints, it was crueller than erasing her completely. A perfect punishment, Ginny thought

suddenly, only to be horrified by her own musings the moment she realized them.

She stood there, gaping at the portrait. She hadn't noticed the flicker or the glow of her skin as the power had been rushing through her, and the bright flash only in her peripheral vision; her gaze had been intent on the eyes of the woman before her, though she had flinched at the loud "bang" which had sounded like a canon had gone off right in front of her.

Time seemed to move in slow motion. She had no words to describe what happened to the painting of the dead matriarch, except to say that it had gone silent. Ginny was still frozen when she heard people stirring from their beds and rushing downstairs to investigate the commotion. Ron was the first to come thumping in.

"Ginny, what the bloody hell is going o—" He stopped, noticing the charred frame and the silently screaming portrait.

Fred and George arrived next.

"Ginny—"

"What—" The twins froze too. Bill, Remus, her father, and mother all arrived in rapid succession, though Ginny did not notice. She felt a gentle hand on her shoulder, and she jerked out of her trance-like state to turn and face the small crowd. With a wide-eyed, startled expression, she looked up at Remus, whose hand still rested on her shoulder. His face was kind as always, but she could not relax.

"What happened?" he asked quietly. She looked from the faces of her brothers, to those of her parents, and back to Remus. She hesitated, turned to take one more glance at the frame, and attempted to answer.

"I don't know." She looked up at Remus with some confusion, and he nodded slightly in response.

"We heard shouting. Did she say something to you?" Remus always seemed to know the right questions to ask. And he's so gentle. How

could he possibly turn into a vicious, man-eating beast once a month? The thoughts flickered through the back of her brain. This was just the prompting she needed to tell the details of the events without getting caught up in the significance of what she had done.

So she told them about waking up and coming downstairs, though she didn't really mention the restlessness she felt or the growing power in her limbs. But she explained in detail the insults and the frame and portrait going black before Mrs. Black came back, silent and desperate, as she was now.

Ginny could see that Remus suspected there was more to it than that, but thankfully he did not press her. Briefly she wondered if he knew about other things she was keeping from her family. Her parents and her brothers seemed satisfied at this explanation, and Remus nodded as if he was, too.

Not surprisingly, Fred broke the eerie silence. "Well, I guess that takes care of that problem."

"Yeah. Plus, it's way creepier now that she's silent," George said, poking the portrait gleefully.

"Exactly. Even with the wonder elves cleaning up the rest of this place, at least we know it'll always have a bit of its old self here, ready to properly scare a group of unsuspecting Aurors," Fred said, nodding at George, who was looking at her with pride. Ginny stopped scowling and tried to shoot them a look of gratitude.

"If all it took was Ginny blowing a gasket, we could've had that blasted thing silenced ages ago!" Ron complained. Remus smiled. Convinced that her former professor was not going to let on about his suspicions, Ginny cracked a small smile in return. As the adrenaline that had been pumping furiously through her body began to fade, she noticed that she was physically exhausted. Her eyes drooped and she yawned, her posture slumping. Remus patted her back and said good night, and Bill helped her back up the stairs, following behind the others.

The next day Ginny didn't wake up until well after lunchtime, and even then she felt completely drained. Clever little Dobby had left a tray of food for her on her nightstand, though she wasn't quite up to eating just yet.

As she lay in bed pondering the night, she turned her head toward the night table in search of a clock. What she found there instead made her sit up and gasp.

Her wand.

I didn't have my bloody wand. She looked around the room as if to find some sort of reasonable explanation. Maybe it was accidental magic. But she hadn't down that in years. So what the hell had happened?

Fortunately, it appeared that no one but Remus had felt that the night's events needed further explanation.

She got up and tied her hair back, quickly choosing something to wear for what was left of the day. Choosing to distract herself, Ginny went downstairs without eating, and found Winky, Remus, and her brother Bill in the kitchen. Bill and Remus were looking over paperwork of some type while Winky was doing the dishes, presumably from lunch. Bill looked up first when she entered the room.

"Good morning, portrait butcher," he teased, grinning at her. She shot him a much-practiced glare.

"You better hope I can't repeat that accident with you."

Bill chuckled and Remus looked up at her with a smile.

"It's already two o'clock, you know. Even Ron beat you down! First time I've seen him since he got here, practically," Bill teased. Winky hopped down off the stool she was standing on and trotted over to Ginny. Winky's temperament seemed to improve every day she was there helping. She smiled up at Ginny.

“Would you be liking some lunch, Miss? Dobby said Miss would be sleeping longer than the other Wheezys.” Ginny liked that the elves singled her out specially. Even Ron was still “Harry Potter’s Wheezy,” instead of his own person.

“Actually, yes please, Winky, I’m starving.” She sat down at the table next to her brother and diagonal from Remus. “So what’s this all about?” she asked, gesturing to the paperwork they had laid out before them. “Order stuff that I’m not allowed to see?”

Remus smiled. “Not really. It is for the Order, but I don’t think it’s a secret.”

Bill grunted. “Even if it were, she’d find a way to see it anyway. Sneaky and bold, that’s Ginny. What do the twins always say about you? That they dare most people to jump out the second story window for a sickle and they chicken out, but they bet you and you tell them to make it a galleon and you’ll jump off Hogwarts’ roof?”

Ginny peeled her banana. “They never agreed to that one.”

“That’s because they know you’d do it, and Mum would kill them,” Bill said.

“Miss Weasley was the only student in her second year class to tame a baby Federer on her first try,” Remus said, smiling in remembrance. Ginny hid her grin by eating a bite of banana. “All the other students shot Cheering Charms at it. Your sister jumped on it.”

Bill laughed. “That sounds like her.”

“Wouldn’t work on a bigger animal, but she earned a perfect on that assignment,” Remus said. “She was the only student who didn’t have to write an essay, though from the others’ responses, she may have given them a few ideas. Including hitting it with a beater’s bat.”

Bill and Ginny laughed at that.



"You've always been vicious in a fight." Bill turned to Remus. "It's a good thing the little banshee's on our side, eh? I wouldn't want to get caught on the business end of her wand."

"Or bat!" Ginny replied, as Winky brought her a plate with a roast beef sandwich, some chips, and a glass of pumpkin juice. "Thanks, Winky." The elf nodded and scurried back to her stool to finish the dishes.

"I have to go, Remus," said Bill, glancing at his watch.

Ginny swallowed a bite of food. "Where are you going, Bill?"

"Gringotts," Bill said, giving her an obvious look. "I have to put in an appearance, you know, since I do still actually work there."

"Helping Fleur with her Eeeeeng-lish?" Ginny teased, her eyebrows raised with implication. Bill chuckled.

"Don't you have a headmaster to harass, fifth year?" Ginny smirked. Bill and she would have fun teasing each other about these secrets of theirs. It almost made her glad he'd overheard her and Dumbledore. Bill collected the papers on the table and stood up. "See you later, Ginny. Bye Remus."

Ginny kissed her brother on the cheek, Remus waved, and Bill left. At some point Winky had finished the dishes and disappeared.

"I wanted to talk to you about what happened last night," Remus began, watching her.

"You did look like you had a few questions," Ginny said, sighing. At least she had a lot of food to console her through the conversation.

"I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable," Remus said, reminding Ginny that the last time she had really spoken to Remus Lupin had been in her second year at Hogwarts. Other than that, they'd just passed each other around Headquarters a lot, both watching from a distance. But she liked his gentle nature and natural aversion to bothering people.

"You aren't," Ginny said calmly, shrugging. "If I feel uncomfortable about anything, it's that I lost control like that in the first place."

"What exactly happened?" he asked.

As she ate her sandwich, Ginny recounted the sequence of events from the night before, only this time, she included a full description of how she felt during her conversation with Mrs. Black. Then she told him how, when she awoke this afternoon, she realized that she hadn't had her wand and the feeling of being drained. He nodded in understanding and didn't interrupt or ask questions as she spoke, which she appreciated. How he can be so agreeable after just watching his best mate die, I can't imagine, she thought morbidly to herself as her story wound down. He does look rather worse than normal, and the full moon is still a couple weeks off. I bet he isn't sleeping. I wouldn't either, if I lost Andy or Kerney, I suppose.

Seeing him up close like this, the bags under his eyes and paleness of his complexion were shocking. His face was gaunt, his eyes dark, and she vaguely remembered that he barely touched his food when she had eaten lunch with him a few days before. I suppose Harry's going to look just as horrible when he arrives. After she finished speaking, he paused for moment in contemplation.

"Did you do anything peculiar yesterday?" Remus asked.

Taking a moment to stop thinking about his health, Ginny thought about her activities the previous day.

"I played hide-and-seek with the twins and Ron and then—Oh! Yes, I did. Dobby showed me this special room in the wall and helped me play a bit of a prank on my brothers," Ginny said, remembering the little crawl space.

"A prank?" Remus prompted.

"I levitated a few things."

His eyes lit with interest. "With your wand?"

“No,” she said slowly. “But Dobby was helping me with elf magic or something. He made my finger glow.”

Remus’s face nearly transformed into one of avid interest, the scholar in him igniting. “Elves have a knack for sensing magical ability in other creatures, including wandless magic. Dobby may have helped you by focusing the ability, but if your finger glowed, it was your own gift. It would explain your restlessness last night. The energy you experienced in your limbs.”

“Really? Wandless magic? That would be cool,” Ginny said. And helpful.

“And dangerous,” Remus cautioned. “Wandless magic is very volatile untrained, as it releases more magic over a wider space because the magic isn’t focused by a wand. The feeling of being drained is a symptom of magical exhaustion. I’d like to inform Professor Dumbledore.”

“Do you really think he’d care?” Ginny asked, not really understanding the big deal. She had seen her father wandlessly cast light when she was little, and her grandmother on her mother’s side had done a lot of tasks wandlessly, Ginny remembered from when she was younger.

“Ginny,” Remus said, sounding a little uncomfortable talking to her so informally, “the type of wandless magic that you are describing is beyond the normal scope that most witches and wizards can maintain.”

“All I did was silence a portrait and levitate a few pots,” Ginny said. “It could have been accidental magic.”

“But it wasn’t,” Remus said. “You told the portrait to be quite, and I assume you meant to move the pots.”

“Yes,” Ginny said.

Before she could add anything else, Remus said, "The headmaster will want to know."

"It'll be the third time I've harassed him this break," Ginny said.

"The third?"

"First about the elves, then asking if I could take O.W.L.s early, and now this," she said, shaking her head. "I'm turning out to be high maintenance."

Remus showed a rare look of being surprised and impressed. "You wanted to take multiple O.W.L.s early?"

She nodded. "Defense, Potions, and Transfiguration."

"Not easy classes," he remarked.

"No, but it doesn't matter. I can't take the tests early," she replied. "Instead, I'll be doing private study in those classes."

Remus's soft brown eyes watched her curiously. "I've never met anyone that wanted to take the O.W.L.s early."

"Students used to move ahead all the time before O.W.L.s were implemented," Ginny said. She knew all about it from trying to convince McGonagall. All of those students had written personal accounts with which Ginny had easily identified. They mentioned how frustrating it was to have to sit in class, knowing they could do the spell they were taught and write the essay about its properties while other students still don't understand what to use the spell for.

"You don't know what Defense will be like this year," Remus said. "It could be challenging."

"Sure, it could. But it could also be taught by Lockheart," Ginny said. "I didn't want to be at the mercy of the next professor, whether they're crazy, a Death Eater, or just incompetent."

Remus smirked. "Or a werewolf."

"You were the only good one we've had," she said, and he looked rather nostalgic. "At D.A. meetings, Harry always says you taught him the most."

"That was nice of him to say."

"The whole Trio adores you," Ginny said, smiling.

Remus looked bemused. "I'd forgotten they were called that."

"It's hard to forget at school."

"You feel pretty strongly about Harry, don't you?" he asked.

Her head shot up in surprise, and she couldn't quite master her face well enough to conceal the flash of a wide-eyed expression that screamed, guilty as charged. "I don't know what you mean."

Remus shot her an understanding look. "I think you do."

Ginny's stony expression softened. It's not like he believed my bad lie anyway. "I'm normally a very good actor, you know."

"It's hard to hide something so big."

"I know. Believe me, I know." She sighed. She'd been dealing with her constant, nagging obsession with Harry Potter for years. She endured Cho bloody Chang. She could certainly endure a couple more awful years until this feeling faded. In fact, the only reason she had been able to say "yes" to Michael Corner was because her feelings for Harry had become this steady constant in the background of her life, only coming to the surface when he was in distress or she was angry at him.

Of course, this was the result of much practice and study of her own behavior. She had always been a pretty good liar, especially to people who didn't observe her very closely, and she rightfully assumed that her brother and his two best friends did not. That's where she'd gone wrong with Remus. Here she was talking to him

one-on-one, and he was more perceptive than most people to begin with. Must be those super werewolf senses.

"Well, don't worry. I won't say a word. Sirius is the one who mentioned it to me," he said, surprising her.

"Really?"

"He was more observant than most people gave him credit for," Remus said quietly.

"And more clever," Ginny said. "He was the only man to ever escape Azkaban, and innocent to boot, but everyone kept walking around him here like he was a pariah."

"He really liked you." This comment made Ginny smile, though it was a sad one. "Said you reminded him of Harry's mum, but I think that was mostly the hair."

Most people felt that way about redheads, Ginny found. "Thanks."

The sadness in Remus's eyes and body language made Ginny feel a physical ache. How many people could one man stand to lose and keep going?

On an impulse, Ginny rose from her seat and gave her former professor a hug. He's going to think I'm such a baby, she thought. Ah well, it's not like I'm not used to embarrassing myself, now is it? And frankly, he looked like he could use one. He returned the embrace, and she held on for a bit and was glad to.

After she pulled back and tucked a loose strand of hair back behind her ear, she said, "I should go study. Or at least start my boring essays."

Her eyes were bright and her mouth quirked slightly as if it were moving toward a grin, but didn't quite get there. He gave her a small smile in return. This time, however, there was no sorrow in their expressions.

“If you need any help, my door is open,” Remus said.

She nodded.

“And I will speak to the headmaster within the week,” he finished.

In the days that passed after her conversation with Remus and her triumph in the game with her brothers, Ginny did a lot of thinking, but not much schoolwork. Charlie was back in England now, in and out of headquarters as often as Bill. It was a great comfort to Ginny having her two oldest brothers back with the family again—especially since the third one still had not come home.

Percy had never been her favorite brother, but his estrangement was causing the rest of her family a lot of distress. It obviously upset her parents—as if Mum and Dad needed more to worry about—and she had been surprised to see her remaining brothers react so violently at his desertion.

Fred and George had always been hardest on Percy, who from quite early on had been a bit of an outcast in the family, and Ron had taken a lot of his direction from the twins, since they had been at home longest of all his other brothers. Ginny was irate mostly because he had deserted eight people who never would have dreamed of deserting him.

Their family stuck together. They could never count on money or material things, but they could always count on each other. And Percy had marred that sacred family tradition. Idiot. Add to that the stuff he had written about Harry and his support of Dolores Umbridge and, well, she wasn't sure if the four youngest Weasleys would ever be able to forgive him.

Having Charlie home was brilliant, though. They talked about Quidditch, of course, and Charlie had been typically critical of his baby sister's 2-for-2 record in catching the Snitch.

“How long did it take you?” he'd asked immediately.

Ginny scowled. “A couple of hours.”

He raised his eyebrows, forcing her to tell the whole truth.

"Three hours," she said at last.

"Shouldn't have taken more than two in a storm," Charlie said, going back to his cereal. Her second snitch catch had taken about four, but he didn't need to know that.

"I wasn't even trained to be a Seeker," she pointed out.

"Excuses are for losers," Charlie said, waving a hand. He had been the one who taught her how to fly when she was six, though no one knew it. He had kept it a secret all these years at her request, and once he had gone back to Hogwarts, she had taken to stealing her other brothers' brooms to practice with.

But as a result of that special attention, he tended to expect greatness from her at every turn. Always had, in fact. He'd once told her how irritated he'd been that she hadn't started to walk until twelve months. Ron, he'd said, had started trotting after the twins at ten months. It was a symptom of being the youngest and a girl, always picked up and carried around. Well, he'd decided right then that he wasn't about to coddle his baby sister.

And it had made her want to impress him more than anyone.

It was also the reason she'd been most ashamed to tell him about the diary. But he'd ended up being the most comforting out of the lot, forgoing pity and excuses: "He picked the best, Gin," he had said. "Can't fault him for that."

So seeing him flit in and out of Grimmauld Place was something like a challenge. She worked twice as hard to direct the elves (who'd cried out in horror when she'd picked up a rag herself) during the day, and every night Charlie came over, he'd look around and make a comment about a spot that was missed or something that should be changed.



The first thing he'd said the first morning he'd been over, after hugging her hello, was, "You couldn't have blasted the portrait off the wall instead of just silencing it?"

"Listen, you big git," she'd said with a smile. "That's more than anyone else was able to do."

"Sure, but I hear you just did it by accident. Because you were mad," he said, eying her closely. "What's a fourteen year old doing accidental magic? Don't you know better than that?"

"I'm too powerful for my own good. It's that simple," she said, refusing to let him make her feel any regret. Her defiance and gumption always made him smile.

The twins stayed over at headquarters less often. They had fixed themselves a place to sleep at the shop, and would often crash there after working late, whether for the Order or for the future troublemakers of Hogwarts. But they still remained her closest brothers. They had taken to giving her prototypes.

"It's not perfect yet. Just tell us what you think," they'd say. And when they came to Grimmauld Place for dinner, their eyes lit up when they saw her, eager for her reactions. Until her discussion with Remus, they were the only ones other than Remus who she told about her private study plans, and they had been ridiculously supportive.

"If she turns out to be a genius, she could help us build the products, not just test them," George reasoned.

"Make McGonagall help you build a new Swamp Prank," Fred said, "and we'll send our ickle Ginny the biggest bunch of flowers and cards to celebrate."

"Somehow I doubt she'll be okay with that, but if she is, don't send me flowers. Just throw me a party next summer," Ginny said, smirking.

"A big one," Fred said.

“Huge.”

“Transcontinental,” they said together.

They were the only other people she told about the wandless magic she had done on the painting (“Further incentive to hire you now!”), and they were the only ones she had informed of her most recent accomplishment with Dobby’s help.

“And you didn’t get cited,” Fred said, eyes lighting up with excitement. “Maybe the Ministry can’t track wandless magic.”

“That would certainly help us avoid some of the more pesky laws that hinder our research,” George said.

But her questions ran further than how she got away with breaking the law. Why was her power manifesting itself now, instead of when she first started at Hogwarts and learned to properly use a wand? Was it all to do with Dobby’s help?

To avoid being consumed by her own curiosity, Ginny went back to studying ahead in her books. Even if she wasn’t taking the O.W.L.s early, finishing the fifth year texts that Ron had dumped on her on the last day of school would be helpful. So back to work she went, memorizing potion ingredients and trying not to think about her magic—or the fact that Harry was coming the next night.

Hermione’s arrival the night before was the main reason Ginny had been left in peace to study, since her brother had gone off with the older girl for most of the day, no doubt to confer on how to deal with Harry.

Hermione had been shocked and excited over the transformation Dobby and Winky had achieved with the house. She spent a lot of time talking to the house-elves, asking about their stay and their work at Hogwarts. Dobby was willing to answer, but Winky was jumpy around Hermione, as if expecting the witch to toss a new piece of clothing at her at any moment.

“Ginny?” her mother said, popping her head into Ginny’s study room. “Would you mind helping me with dinner?”

As good as her mother's household spells were, they just couldn't make up for human hands.

“Sure,” Ginny said, snapping her book shut and going to trudge after her mother down to the kitchen, passing the portrait on her way to wash her hands and begin peeling potatoes.

Surprisingly, Hermione had not mentioned the now-silent portrait. Probably too caught up in planning for Harry’s arrival.

“I’ll chop them, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said when she saw that Ginny was done with the first of three. The potato floated over to the counter, where a big knife started cutting the pieces into uneven parts. The Potions maker in Ginny cringed at the sight. No wonder they had always chopped by hand in class. The spell version lacked precision. There was no way 1/3 chopped liver could counter balance the tendency of juices to make the potion-drinker drowsy if the liver was chopped like that.

Okay. I’ve been studying too much.

But Potions was one of her favorite and easiest classes. In second year, Ginny had hit a stride in that class, and ever since it had felt more like a refresher than a challenge.

“Keep peeling, Ginny,” Mrs. Weasley said. “We need all three for the soup. We’re expecting quite a crowd.”

In fact, at dinner that night there was an odd sort of showing: Mr. Weasley was working late, but Ron and Hermione were there, of course; Charlie was home; Tonks was seated next to him; and Remus appeared to have returned from his transformation. He looked wretched, but then, he usually did after the full moon. But her mum’s cooking would help remedy that, no doubt. There were two empty seats left at the table, as Ginny seemed to be the last one to arrive in the kitchen. She took the one next to Charlie.

“You helped make dinner?” he asked, looking skeptical.

“I peeled potatoes, set the table, and was generally indispensable,” Ginny bragged.

“Good. You’re learning women’s work,” Charlie said condescendingly. “In addition to cleaning more.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Want me to repeat that to Mum?”

“Go ahead. She’d probably agree.” Charlie enjoyed teasing Ginny about needing to learn women’s work—“cooking, cleaning, and making babies”—simply because he knew it would irritate her. She used to scream and cry when he said it. But then she’d realized that secretly teaching her to fly a broom meant he didn’t really believe what he said. And once she was old enough to learn from the twins, she knew that the fact that he’d put her on a broom when she was eight was rather good blackmail material to keep him from continuing to tease her. Charlie, in his typical fashion, had never been prouder of her than when she’d first properly blackmailed him.

Hermione was just scooping some beans onto her plate when the flames in the fireplace flared green, and Dumbledore strode out.

“I wondered if I could join you for dinner,” he said, though it was less a question than a statement of the reason for his arrival.

“Of course, Headmaster! There’s an empty seat right here, next to Ginny,” her mother replied, indicating the chair Ginny had rejected a few seconds before. Dumbledore came around the table and sat down beside her, greeting Remus, who sat on his other side, and then turning to Ginny.

“See?” Charlie whispered too low for anyone else to hear. “Dumbledore doesn’t cook for himself because he’s a man.”

“Then what’s your excuse?” Ginny asked snidely, passing him the rolls.

As the food went around the table and people began loading their plates, there was sufficient murmur and conversation that Dumbledore could speak to her without attracting attention.

“Dobby and Remus have informed me that you have been displaying some new and interesting abilities.”

Ginny’s mind leapt in relief and a certain measure of excitement. She would get to talk with Dumbledore about her magic. “Yes, sir. I was hoping I would be able to talk to you about it.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Perhaps after dinner we could have another chat in the parlor.”

Ginny nodded. “That sounds great. Could Remus come, too?”

Dumbledore nodded in agreement and turned back to his plate.

“So, Charlie,” Ginny said loudly enough that everyone at the table could hear, though she looked like she was only talking to him. “I heard that a man lost an arm on your reservation last week.”

A complete and utter lie, and she knew it. But that didn’t matter to their mother, who pounced on the information.

“I knew it,” Mrs. Weasley said, nearly dropping her fork. “I knew working with dragon was too dangerous, but your father said—”

“It’s not true.”

“Why would Ginny make up something like that?” their mother asked rhetorically, making Ginny have to cover her smirk with a sip of milk.

“Because she’s mean,” Charlie muttered before loudly replying, “She probably made a mistake.”

“Then it probably happened at another reservation, which doesn’t make it any less dangerous at yours,” Mrs. Weasley said.

Charlie was probably going to get her back in a big way, but Ginny couldn't bring herself to care as she enjoyed her soup and vegetables. Mr. Weasley wasn't even there to placate his wife and save Charlie, so he'd have to deal with this all on his own. It all just made Ginny smile more.

As soon as they cleared their dishes, Ron and Hermione excused themselves to go confer some more before bed. Not that Ginny particularly minded this time, since she was going to be doing some conferring of her own—and with much more interesting accomplices, if she did say so herself.

Having finished dinner herself, and with her mother and Charlie still having their conversation, Ginny slipped out of the room to wait for Dumbledore, who was still in the kitchen.

She didn't have to wait long.

"Oh, Headmaster. You don't have to clear your dish. Let me," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Now, Molly, I may be old, but I believe I can endure the journey to the sink," Dumbledore said mildly.

His humor always surprised Ginny. It didn't seem right that the most powerful wizard in the world should have a sense of humor. Voldemort himself was frightened of this man who spoke in such soft tones. And as the darkness rose around them—as people were attacked and Muggle bridges were destroyed—this gentle-seeming man was holding the world together with the same wrinkled hands that placed his plate and bowl in the old, metal sink at Grimmauld Place.

"Dobby and Winky will probably want to clean that themselves," Ginny said, nodding at the pile of dishes stacked in there beside his.

"The house-elves informed me that I would have to leave if I attempted to do the dishes myself," Dumbledore said, nodding down at her. Remus, yawning, joined them soon after putting his own dishes on the stack.

“Would you mind if we spoke in the study room on the third floor?” Ginny asked. “All of my books are up there, and I want to put them in order before I go to bed. Otherwise Winky does everything, and I feel bad.”

Dumbledore’s eyes were off, twinkling like mad, but Remus just nodded and followed her up there. They went in, shut the door, and Dumbledore and Remus settled into the squashy chairs in the corner while Ginny straightened her books on the desk before sitting on the wood desk chair.

Ginny brought Dumbledore up to speed about the painting and the game she had been playing with her brothers. Dumbledore’s face remained neutral when she described the same warm, faint tingling sensation in relation to the joke she played with Dobby that she had for the incident with Mrs. Black’s depiction.

As they sat there, in Sirius’s house in the early days of a war she felt drawn into—a lonely girl, a werewolf, and the greatest wizard of the age—Ginny could feel the atmosphere change. And she became nervous.

As Dumbledore pondered what she had told him, his eyes never left hers. The way he had always looked at her until now, as if they were sharing an exceedingly clever inside joke, was gone. In its place was an expression that emanated pride and sadness at the same time.

Dumbledore turned briefly to Remus, smiled, and turned back to Ginny. The soon-to-be-fifth-year sat up straighter, because it appeared the old professor was about to speak.

“It seems that Tom Riddle, not unlike most of your brothers, may live to regret the day he chose to cross Ginny Weasley.” The headmaster had taken on a mischievous look, which had the wonderful effect of comforting Ginny immediately.

Perhaps a result of growing up with the twins, she always felt better when there was a scheme, a plan, or the potential of one—whether it

was for a childish prank or a war to defeat a dark wizard—a plan meant there was hope, a chance of triumph, no matter how small.

“When Lucius Malfoy gave you Tom Riddle’s diary four years ago, I doubt he recalled that you are the first female child to be born into the Weasley family in quite some time, though I’m sure he knew in some distant part of his mind. Six generations passed without a single girl, but in the seventh, finally, you arrived,” Dumbledore said, watching her steadily.

Ginny started. “Those stories are make-believe.”

Everyone had heard the legends of the seventh daughter in seven generations. It was a story mums told children before they went to sleep; there was always a small girl—the seventh generation daughter—who overcame dragons and warlocks and even goblins to save her family, town, or even the world. But it was all just fantasy.

“It would not do to discount the worth of stories,” Dumbledore said, blue eyes twinkling. Remus looked a bit skeptical as well, but when he considered Ginny, his face relaxed as if he could believe it. “Many believe that when several generations pass without a daughter, the female magic in that family’s blood builds upon itself. Thus, by the time a daughter is finally born, the power of multiple generations of witches has accumulated and will manifest itself in that one child in unique ways. In other words: you.”

“Seven generations,” Ginny repeated. Every good story talked about sevens.

“And the seventh child,” Remus added. Well, wasn’t this just starting to seem a little creepy?

“But that doesn’t explain the wandless magic,” Ginny said.

“Wandless magic,” Dumbledore said sadly, “manifests in witches and wizards whose internal wards have been breeched.” Tom. Tom did this to me. “However, its connection to your emotions, its instinctive reaction to protect you from those who anger you or make you sad, is



unique. As if six generations of dormant magic has stitched together to protect the witch they were waiting for.”

The thought of all those generations—of her mother’s and her father’s families—reaching across time to protect her didn’t seem that implausible. Her family had been trying to protect her all her life anyway.

“I believe Lucius Malfoy picked you because he disliked your father and your family. I don’t think he ever understood exactly what it was he had been charged with protecting. If he did, I doubt he would have given it to you who was so deeply connected to magic through your unique birth.”

“Fat lot of good that birthright did me my first year.” All of Ginny’s memories of that year were dark, unpleasant, and rather lonely. She preferred to pretend it hadn’t happened.

“You resisted the pull of Tom Riddle for nearly a year,” Dumbledore said. “And when he saw that he could not completely consume you, he hid you in the dungeon to draw out Harry Potter, whom he could never fully attack through you.”

Ginny was trying to process all this new information, which wasn’t a simple task when you felt like your entire world was being rocked violently from side to side. Yet it made sense that there was something special about being the only girl amidst all those boys. Charlie—if she ever told him, which she didn’t plan to—could hardly make fun of her then. She chanced a look at Remus, who was giving her an appreciative but studying look.

“Well, that’s something,” she said, trying to get her bearings in the conversation.

Dumbledore looked content. “Training you to control your wandless abilities should be rather simple. Most find it an instinctual processes.”

“Oh,” Ginny said, surprised. She tried to lighten the mood. “That’s nice. I don’t want to accidentally attack the Fat Lady or anything.”

Dumbledore smiled. "That will be arranged. Remus has offered his own services for the lesson."

Ginny, surprised, turned to her old professor, who said, "Werewolves all have some wandless magic due to the violent nature of the transformation. Our inner wards are more fragile."

Well, that was awful. "So have you ever blown up an annoying portrait?"

The werewolf smiled. "I can't say that I have."

"It's very rewarding. You should try it."

"I'll settle for teaching you how not to do it accidentally," Remus said, trying to hide his smirk.

Dumbledore nodded. "I believe it will put Mr. Filch at ease, at least."

Ginny smiled.

"Now," the headmaster said, standing, "I have a few more tasks to accomplish before the day ends." He turned to Ginny. "Please inform Remus if you have any other incidents."

"Sure. Thank you, Professor Dumbledore. I really appreciate all your help." She shook his hand, as she always did. The first time was after she and Harry had escaped from the Chamber of Secrets and he had come to speak with her in the hospital wing, and she had only done it because she didn't think it would have been appropriate to hug him. Ever since then, he had always seemed amused that she did it, so she kept up the habit.

"Not at all. Goodnight, Miss Weasley. I'll speak to you soon, Remus,"

"Goodnight, Professor," Remus replied. And he was gone. Ginny loved that Remus and Sirius had always called him Professor Dumbledore when addressing him; it reminded her of all their stories

about getting into trouble when they were at Hogwarts. She turned to Remus.

"You act like a guilty troublemaker around him," Ginny said.

"I keep waiting for him to retroactively take away points."

She smiled, but also admitted, "I'm glad you're going to be my teacher."

Remus shook his head. "I hope I can help."

"I'm sure you can," Ginny said. "And maybe you could also help me with my Patronus, too. Harry said you were the one who taught him, and I just can't manage it."

"We'll see," Remus said. "Perhaps we could go to Hogwarts to practice on your birthday."

Ginny's eyes lit up. "That would be great."

"I will see what I can do."

Ginny beamed, and hugged him impulsively for the second time that summer.

"You are bloody brilliant, Remus, do you know that?" When she had pulled away, he was jolted by the memory of another redhead who had said the very same thing to him a long time ago. He smiled sadly at the memory. Ginny had reached the door and interrupted his nostalgia.

"Goodnight, Remus."

"Goodnight, Ginny."

As Remus succumbed once more to memories of his best friend's wife and Harry's mother, Ginny found her way to the bedroom she shared with Hermione. The door was closed, and when she opened it

without knocking, she saw the two older kids turn around abruptly and hush up their earnest conversation.

“Oy, you think you could learn to knock?” Ron asked.

“Oy, you think you could talk in your room? It’s not like Harry’s going to be in there to hear you gossiping about him anyway.” Ron sputtered, but Hermione just looked guilty at having been caught.

“What did you hear?” Ron demanded, accusingly.

“Nothing, you great git, but it’s obvious you’re talking about Harry.”

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look before Hermione said, “We just want to be prepared for when he arrives.”

Ginny shook her head. “You don’t know that he’ll be like he was last summer. He’s probably looking forward to seeing you. Can’t you just enjoy that for a little while?”

Hermione looked like she wanted to say something, but held back. She and Ron were so used to hiding everything that they knew about Harry that it was like a second nature to them. Ginny wondered if Hermione had changed as much as Ron had over the course of her friendship with Harry.

“She’s right. We should be glad he didn’t have to stay long at the Dursleys,” Hermione said, clearly trying to please both of them.

“Stupid Muggles,” Ron muttered.

“Ron!”

“Fine. Stupid Dursleys. Is that better?” he asked. Hermione didn’t seem to think so, but also wasn’t up for an argument at this late hour. If there was one thing that Ginny had learned about Hermione over the course of Dumbledore’s Army and fighting at the Ministry, it was that she was unexpectedly tough and always willing to stand up for Ron and Harry. It was almost nice to see that she was also learning that she didn’t have to fight them over every little detail.

Ron left shortly thereafter, and Hermione prepared for bed.

As Ginny changed into her pajamas and brushed her teeth, she thought about how Harry had been acting after their excursion to the Department of Mysteries. She had been in the hospital with Ron when Harry arrived, having been brought back by Dumbledore they all found out.

Harry had been sad, but not lost. Instead of removing himself from the world, he'd seemed burdened, distracted, and so very lonely. She'd watched him interact with Hermione and Ron, the inseparable Trio, and he'd seemed to be pulling away, getting ready to say goodbye for longer than just the few weeks he had spent at the Dursleys.

Ginny wondered as she crawled into bed if the three of them had any idea about the sorts of stories that went around the school about them.

It was almost like a right of passage for a first year to learn about their daring rescue of the Sorcerer's Stone. And Ginny always knew when the students learned about the way Harry had saved her from the Chamber and defeated the unseen Heir of Slytherin because they looked at her in awe, since she'd had a chance to see his heroics in action.

Last year, the stories had taken a lull in the beginning, but by the end of the year, they spread with more fervor than ever before, as if retelling the stories was another way to defy Umbridge, by bolstering the image of the Boy-Who-Lived, her only opponent. The Tri-Wizard tournament and Harry's steadfast telling of the truth had reached myth-like levels.

No doubt the Department of Mysteries story would be told as well now.

Ron, Hermione, and Luna had all been asleep for a long time after they returned, recovering from various curses. Neville had been quick to heal and quickly released. But Ginny had shattered her ankle and

lower leg bone, not to mention suffering some nasty after-effects of the curse that one of the Death Eaters had blasted at her, and she had been awake when Harry arrived in the Hospital wing that night. He hadn't noticed that she was awake, but she'd watched him for a long time.

He looked sad, tired, and very much like a hero in his stoic refusal to break down. Harry had always been too old for his age, and yet that night had made an already-mature teenager grow into a man.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Best Gift

Harry arrived at Grimmauld Place with Professor Dumbledore at eleven o'clock that night.

He looked like he'd grown in the few weeks since Ginny had seen him, though Ron still towered over him when he ambled over to clap him on the back.

"Hey, mate, glad you made it," Ron said, grinning. It seemed that despite the gauntlet of preparation he and Hermione had gone through for seeing Harry again, joy at the reunion overrode their best-laid plans.

"It's good to see you," Hermione said, tiptoeing to wrap her arms around Harry neck. As he awkwardly patted her back—looking tense, but pleased to be with his friends again—his green eyes darted to the headmaster before focusing on Hermione again.

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley said, embracing him quickly before looking him up and down. She kept her disappointment with his thin frame to herself, though she was clearly already planning the meals she'd shove in front of him for the duration of his stay. "You've missed dinner, but I kept a plate for you in the kitchen. And some extra soup on the stove in case you're hungry later."

Ginny followed, amused, as she herded the Trio into the kitchen and practically shoved the Boy-Who-Lived into a chair with a large plate of food in front of him. Hermione and Ron took up seats, too. Dumbledore stayed in the foyer, talking to Mr. Weasley, and Mrs. Weasley went to join them as soon as she sternly insisted that Harry eat everything on his plate.

Ginny snatched a biscuit from the tray her mother had left out to cool on the stove, and made her way over to the table where the twins had joined in, boisterously greeting Harry.

"The store's so busy we had to hire help," George was telling Harry as the redhead scooped a chopped potato off his friend's plate with a fork.

"Good looking help," Fred noted.

"People are clamoring for a piece of our brilliance."

"And we have a box for you upstairs," Fred said, snatching the next bit of potato off George's fork before it reached his mouth.

Ron protested, "That's not fair! Why are you giving him stuff when you won't give me bloody anything?"

"Haven't you heard, Ron? He's the Boy-Who-Lived," Fred said condescendingly, jerking his thumb in Harry's direction.

"Triwizard Champion, Chosen One, Big Deal Extraordinaire," George chimed in.

Fred nodded to each new title. "It's a law that we have to treat him special."

"Hence the box."

"And he was our star Seeker," Fred said.

"Didn't miss a Snitch except when attacked by Dementors."

"Which we forgave him for years ago," Fred said, taking a sip of his water.

"So this could also be a present for that." Their words made Harry smile lightly, easing the tension from his face. He was just beginning to eat his food when he paused and looked around the room. Ginny watched with some measure of satisfaction as his mind registered that the house had been dramatically altered and, for what seemed like the first time in months, she heard Harry Potter's voice.

"What happened to this place?" he asked, shock evident in his tone.



“Ginny,” Fred said, nodding at her. Harry turned to where she sat at the table.

She waved her half-eaten biscuit at him, and said lightly, “I have a secret passion for cleaning. Detention in the trophy room is like a reward, really.”

Harry looked uncertain and doubtful, which only intensified when George laughed and Fred threw a grape at her, which she swatted away.

“Don’t listen to the little liar, Harry. She’s enlisted the help of a couple of house-elves like the cheater she is,” Fred said, tilting his glass towards her and making the water spill out.

Ginny grinned. “It’s not cheating. It’s creative solution making. Did you want handle the doxies again?”

Fred snapped his fingers and shot a look at George. “Doxies.”

George, whose eyes were bright, nodded and stood.

“Good to see you, mate, but we need to take care of something really fast,” George said, edging toward the door.

“Be back soon,” Fred agreed, moving to follow his twin. “Don’t do anything stupid or dangerous until we come back and can go with you.”

Ginny grinned and waved goodbye, but Harry still looked a bit startled at the new, bright demeanor of the house.

“It looks completely different,” Harry said.

“Dobby and Winky will be glad to hear you say that,” Ginny said.

“Glad?” Ron scoffed. “They’ll probably have fits of joy. They’re scary, mate.”

“Ron, house-elves don’t know any better,” Hermione said, pursing her lips in an obvious effort not to lecture him on Harry’s first night back. Ginny, at least, appreciated that.

“Dobby’s here?” Harry asked, scanning the kitchen as if the little elf might appear at any moment.

“Not right now,” Ginny said, shaking her head. “Dumbledore had a job for him and Winky tonight, but they’ll be back tomorrow.”

Harry nodded. Ron and Hermione chatted with him, not commenting on his serious mood, and Ginny took the chance to really look at the Boy-Who-Lived. He looked world-weary. Which wasn’t to say he wasn’t still attractive. Clearly he was. A blind dog could tell that his prominent cheekbones and intense green eyes were hot. The boyish good looks that had turned heads the year before were fading, being replaced by the harder, more sculpted features of a man. But the adult-like resolve that was so apparent in all of his movements barely hid the weariness. He looked like he should finish her mother’s meal and then sleep for a couple of weeks, but Ginny knew that wasn’t likely.

He never gave in, never relaxed, no matter how easy it might have been. The I will not tell lies scar that showed so prominently on his pale hand was a testament to that fact.

“How were the Dursleys?” Ron asked, sliding Harry’s plate in front of him when it became obvious that Harry was done with it.

“Quiet, mostly,” Harry said, shifting his gaze around the kitchen. It was an unspoken rule amongst Harry’s friends that they didn’t talk about Harry’s Muggle relatives, the ones who had never, in all the years Ginny had been at school with him, written him a single letter. But the Dursleys were universally hated nonetheless.

“I’d be quiet too if I had Moody and Shacklebolt threatening me,” Ginny said, leaning her head against her palm, elbow on the table.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded. A year ago, Ginny might not have felt comfortable sitting with the three of them. And Harry definitely

wouldn't have felt as comfortable around her, but a year of working together in a covert group to undermine wrongful authority tended to make people closer. Not to mention going to the Ministry, fighting Death Eaters, and then helping morph Malfoy into a half-human slug thing on the train.

"What happened to the painting?" he asked, nodding toward the front hall. "Was that the house-elves too?"

Hermione's face registered her own surprise at having overlooked such a detail. "That's true. I haven't heard Mrs. Black since I got here."

"Nah, Ginny threw a fit and accidentally silenced the old bat," Ron said proudly, nodding at his sister.

"I'm really starting to sound amazingly helpful around the house now, aren't I?" Ginny said, laughing as she stood up. "I'll have to look into endorsement deals with cleaning products soon."

"You accidentally silenced her?" Harry asked, watching her carefully.

Not wanting to lie or reveal the truth, Ginny shrugged. "She was being very rude, and it was bothering me."

She smiled at him, trying to make him feel a bit less uncomfortable, and the sudden, silent arrival of Dobby and Winky in the kitchen served as a distraction. Both elves looked anxious when they saw Harry, though Dobby's face broke out into a grin.

"Hi, Dobby. Hi, Winky," Harry said to his small friends, whose delight at seeing their favorite wizard was evident on their faces.

Dobby found his voice first. "Harry Potter, sir! Dobby is so happy that you is come home!"

Home. The word obviously had an effect on Harry, who practically started in his seat. Grimmauld Place was not Harry's home, no matter how clean and shiny it was. No, to Harry it would always be the prison where Sirius had been sequestered before he died. Ginny was

disappointed to realize she felt the same, even with the elf-enhanced cleaning work.

“Thank you,” Harry said politely, as always. “It looks lovely.”

“Oh, Master is too kind, sir!” Winky wailed, crying. Dobby wrapped a hand around her.

“We is glad to be working for a house of good wizards and witches,” Dobby said.

“I’m glad you’re here, too,” Harry said. Ginny had found that part of what made Harry such a good teacher in the D.A. the year before was that he seemed to know exactly what a person most needed to hear. He knew just how to make people stand a little taller, try a little harder, want to be better for Harry. And he had no idea that he was doing it.

Dobby smiled. “We is needing to work, Harry Potter, sir.”

And the two little elves disappeared.

“Oh, they’ve been wonderful,” Hermione said. “And the headmaster’s paying their wages.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s great,” Ron said, “but that little girl one’s going to kill herself if she keeps on wailing like that.”

“And she’ll be exceedingly proud to do so,” Ginny said, smiling. She gave Harry a brief hug. “It is nice to see you, Harry, but I’m very tired. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Ginny.”

She turned around to walk up the stairs, but she could feel him watching her all the way up.

Merlin, he looked good.

Once she was upstairs and out of sight, she shook her head at her own foolishness. Get a hold of yourself. She breathed deeply to calm herself down. He was just a bloke. She'd had a lot of blokes look at her like they wanted to kiss her. Heck, a couple actually had. But there was something about Harry Potter that made her want to snog the daylights out of him.

It never seemed to fade, her crush on him; rather, it served as a constant buzz in the back of her mind that flared unexpectedly, and she'd come to terms with that. After all, he was a hero. A good-looking hero who had saved her life at a young age. Hardly the type of crush she could brush aside. And to top it off, he was humble, a nice bloke with a sense of humor who was excellent at Quidditch and had a smile that could make a Seeker forget the Snitch. Of course she liked him. Still, the intensity of her attraction to him caught her by surprise sometimes.

Ginny was floating on the edge of consciousness, just beginning to perceive sunlight coming into the room. Taking in the warmth of her bed, she rolled over and opened her eyes, only to see a blurry clock. Now fully awake, she rubbed her eyes and made out the time: 10:23 a.m. She sat up, still ensconced in the covers, and examined the bedchamber she had appropriated for herself.

Hearing a small scuffling noise, she turned her head to find what appeared to be a kitten messing about on one of the freshly waxed hardwood floors of Spinner's End, the main house of the ancient Potter estate, Harry's grandparents' house.

Well, Ginny supposed it wasn't so much theirs anymore, since they had died and left it briefly to Harry's dad, who had died and left it to Harry.

Except that Harry hadn't even known Spinner's End existed until a few weeks ago, when Dumbledore and he had disappeared for a day to have a long talk. Most likely they had discussed many things, but Harry's family holdings had been the one he'd immediately told Hermione, Ron, and Ginny about.

Apparently, they simply couldn't find the place. Ginny figured that it was better protected than Grimmauld Place, considering the one person who could find it (Harry) hadn't even known it existed. But prior to the events at the Department of Mysteries and the revelation of Voldemort's return, there had been more pressing concerns for Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix than finding a big old family mansion.

That situation changed a few weeks after Sirius died. The circumstances surrounding Sirius's demise and the execution of his will proved to be more precarious than expected, particularly when Narcissa Malfoy challenged the validity of Sirius's original inheritance, and thus Harry's as well, to whom Sirius left the majority of his stuff. Due to this unwelcome development, Dumbledore arranged for Harry to locate his family's estate as a safe haven for him should Grimmauld Place be lost.

"Wouldn't it be awful if the Malfoys took Grimmauld Place just as it was starting to look like a home?" Hermione had said.

"I'd trash the place if we lost it," Ginny said, looking at the newly-cleaned floors and curtains.

"I'd help," Ron said.

But mass destruction ended up not being necessary. Grimmauld Place passed to Harry's authority cleanly.

Yet even after Grimmauld Place was safely declared to be Harry's, Spinner's End remained on his mind.

"I want to find it," Harry had told Ron and Hermione. "I've never seen where my parents lived."

Ron had told Ginny of the conversation the next day, and within the week (and with extensive help from Bill and the Gringott's goblins), Harry had found his house.

The kitten was dark, slate grey, and was having it out with Ginny's slipper. It must have sensed her gaze, because it suddenly jerked

around and gazed right back at her, forgetting about the slipper for a moment. Then it tore out of the room like its tail was on fire. Ginny shrugged and stood, heading down to the kitchen to see if Dedalus Diggle and her brother Bill were still eating breakfast.

Two Weasleys and a trusted Order member from the first war made up the human elements of the team who had volunteered to transform the house into a safe and presentable residence for its owner. Bill and Ded were there to analyze, repair, or enhance the wards and protective charms, while Ginny, Dobby, and Winky had become the ultimate domestic tag team.

"I've really found my niche," Ginny had joked to herself after the first day of secret dusting (the house-elves hated when they caught her cleaning).

Harry was busy with Dumbledore doing various things that no one really talked or asked about, though Ron and Hermione were starting to look worried about being left out of the loop. Since Spinner's End wasn't hooked up to the floo yet, Harry had to stay at Grimmauld Place, and his two friends insisted on staying with him, whether they knew what he was doing or not. So it fell to others to take care of Spinner's End before his arrival.

"Hey, Gin," Bill said, seeing her enter the vast kitchen. "Decided to take your time waking up today?"

"We found the attic entrance last night. Took a long time," Ginny said, joining him at the island in the middle of the beautiful kitchen. It had a marble top and six tall bar chairs pulled up to the counter where Bill, Ded, and she ate most of their meals. The formal dining room looked too fancy, and the round kitchen table in the sunny morning room hadn't been checked yet.

"Sounds like fun," Bill said. "Just don't let Ded up there. He might be overcome with emotion and take a photo of the family."

Ginny rolled her eyes. The older man's devotion to the Potters bordered on obsession.

"I won't even mention it to him," Ginny said, pouring a glass of orange juice. "I thought he'd start snogging that bust of Harry's old relative in the parlor."

Bill raised an eyebrow, silently reprimanding her.

"I just woke up. I'm allowed to be a little mean," she said, reaching for a bagel. "You're checking the last of the wards today, right?"

"Actually, I already did that this morning," Bill said, smiling. "I can't believe this took as long as it did. They had individual wards on each of the rooms for everything from notifying house-elves when occupants woke to a direct connection between a nursery and the master suite. Plus, they had seven layers of wards just on the land. I never expected this, but Ded said it was normal for ancestral homes. I've only worked with old tombs, so I wouldn't know, and it took forever to piece together."

"Aw. That's nice that you're able to admit your own shortcomings, Mr. Head Boy," Ginny teased.

"Working with such a smart-aleck little sister hardly helped me be more efficient," Bill said.

"You adore me. Don't lie," Ginny said, ripping off a piece of bagel and popping it in her mouth. "Just not as much as the French girl."

"Whom I haven't seen in days," Bill said.

He didn't normally complain, so Ginny decided to take pity on him. "Why don't you visit her today? I'm all right with Dobby and Winky here, and Ded's around. Plus, you actually do seem decent at your job, so the wards should probably hold."

Bill gave her an amused look. "They will. And I might take you up on that."

"Go ahead," Ginny said. "It can be that favor I owe you."

"I knew you'd have to be getting something out of this," Bill said.



Ginny grinned. "Loving you and owing you are completely different things."

And so Ginny spent the day mostly alone as Dobby and Winky popped all over the house double checking to make sure that there were absolutely no signs of dust, spider webs, and any other marks of lack-of-use that would mar Harry's homecoming that night. Not that there was a big concern. The house was very nearly pristine when they'd first arrived, and after a few days, it looked even better.

It helped, of course, that the elves were used to cleaning up Grimmauld Place. It made the Potter house seem like Heaven.

Between cleaning Grimmauld Place, reading her texts, and now taking on the Spinner's End challenge, Ginny had more than enough projects to keep her from feeling lonely or ineffectual. It was actually really nice.

They had been there about two weeks, having left Grimmauld Place a couple days after Harry had arrived, and tonight Ginny would be trading Bill and Ded for Harry, Hermione, Ron, Remus, and her parents. That brought the total number of wizards who could gain entrance to Spinner's End to ten, plus two house elves, though Tonks, Charlie, and the twins would undoubtedly be allowed over at some point in the future.

As the owner of the house, Harry had ultimate authority over the wards. He had to personally admit all visitors, which made things interesting.

"And that's how it's going to always be," Bill had said after he and Ded looked over the wards. "Only the head of the family can manipulate these without a lot of brute force."

"Oh ho!" Ded had exclaimed. "There are some newer charms that I wouldn't ever be able to break. Lily Potter's work, no doubt."

And that was how they'd known from the first day that the house was rather special.

Harry arrived three hours earlier than everyone else that night, Hedwig's empty cage and his own packed trunk in hand.

"You're early," Ginny said, happy that she'd been in the living room reading when the fire had flared to life.

"I wanted to see what it looked like," Harry said, taking in the room with hungry eyes. "I only saw it in passing the first time, when I brought you all here."

"And now it's all sparkly and clean," Ginny said, smiling. She'd want to be the first to see her house too, and she felt a little guilty for her familiarity with Spinner's End, but Harry never made her feel bad about it.

"It is very clean," Harry agreed.

"And comfortable. Your family had good couches," Ginny said, nodding toward the ones on the other side of the room. "You'll want to set up a password on the floo after everyone arrives. Bill said something about that, but I wasn't really paying attention since it didn't involve me."

Harry nodded. "All right."

He still seemed too serious and tense for her liking, but she figured that was normal when someone was seeing their family home for the first time without any memories of the place.

"You want a tour?" Ginny offered, glancing around.

Harry nodded again. "You think I should just leave my trunk here?"

"It's your house," Ginny said, smiling. "You could dump everything out on the floor if you wanted, though Dobby and Winky would probably organize everything and have it in your room before you could properly enjoy the mess."

"I have a room?"

Ginny stopped walking to turn to look at him dead in the eye. "Harry, this is your home. Yours."

"Oh. Right," Harry said, taking a deep breath. It was as if he were stealing himself for battle rather than a house tour; it was odd to think he was more comfortable in the former situation.

"Let's go," Ginny suggested, heading toward the kitchen.

They spent the better part of two hours meandering through the mansion, which was situated on the outer edge of a forest, on the western edge of Inis Meain, the middle island of the Aran Isles, off the west coast of Ireland, and provided a breathtaking view of the water. From her bedroom window, Ginny could tell that the house, for all its size, was well-hidden by the trees, but for the clean line of sight from the master suite to the ocean.

Harry had stared at the view from the back patio for a long time, eyes trained on the horizon. Ginny stared with him, enjoying the view. Had the world been kinder to this boy, he would have grown up either in this house or visiting it often. Either way, this view wouldn't have taken his breath away so thoroughly, and Ginny kind of liked that it did. It made him seem more human.

"You can see the ocean from the master suite, too," Ginny said, he looked over at her in askance. "Your room, I mean."

He shook his head, and they headed inside. "This is probably why Snape always harasses me about being spoiled. Expected that I lived here."

"Do you think you should move to avoid validating his bitterness?" Ginny asked, leading him down the hall off the kitchen.

"After seeing this place? No, I'd rather move in and really give him a reason to hate me," Harry said, and they continued their tour. He often stopped to look at paintings on the wall and pull books from shelves. He looked uncomfortable when the bust of his great-grandfather greeted him loudly across the parlor. There was a piano

room, two living rooms, a formal dining room, a study, and a room that Bill said was a 'smoking room' that Ginny didn't really care for. It was the darkest one in the house. And that was just the first floor.

The second floor over the kitchen almost exclusively contained bedrooms, and it was where Ginny had designated a room for her parents. It also happened to be on almost the exact opposite side of the house than the area where she, Hermione, Ron, and Harry would stay.

In fact, there were more bedrooms in the house than either of them could ever have imagined, each equally beautiful, but after a couple, Harry said he could look at the rest later. So they made their way out of the guest area toward the more secluded group of rooms in the back of the house where the master suite was located.

Trudging up to the third floor, Ginny pointed out that Remus would stay on the second floor of this area and Ron and Hermione had the rooms across from the master suite on the third floor.

"And you?" Harry asked, watching a painting of a horse race.

"I'm next door to you," she said. "It's the smallest room, which means it's still double my normal one, but I have access to your beautiful balcony, so I'm refusing to give it up."

Harry smiled and turned to her. "I have a balcony."

"You have a room so big it could eat the Burrow and not realize it," Ginny said, nodding at the double doors. Harry turned the handle and pushed it open, and they were both caught unawares as Hedwig flew over and landed on Harry's shoulder. Smart owl.

"Good girl," Harry said, glancing around.

The master suite was, predictably, enormous. Harry had his own, generously proportioned bathroom, two walk-in closets, and rather large sitting room all to himself. Sunlight was pouring in through the windows onto the light yellow walls. The bed had a large, soft gold

bedspread and dark wooden headboard. The floor was hardwood, shinny and polished.

Ginny had been in here just yesterday, and the room had looked clean and welcoming, but now there were a dozen picture frames on the desks and tables in the room, all featuring Harry's family. An old black and white hung over the couch with about a dozen people in it, including a small boy running in front of the camera; all the people were smiling and waving.

But the picture that caught both of their attentions was the large one over the private fireplace. It was a portrait of Mr. and Mrs. James Potter looking young and happy, with James standing behind Lily but holding her hand. They really were an exceedingly gorgeous couple and could not have been older than twenty in the picture.

"Did you do this?" Harry asked, looking up at it.

Ginny shook her head. "I wish I had. I don't know—"

"Mr. Harry Potter has arrived early!" Dobby cried, making both teens spin to see the little elf. Winky was beside him, floating a couple of picture frame as her eyes filled with water.

"The room isn't done, sir!" Winky said sadly.

"You're decorating it?" Ginny asked, noticing a picture of Remus, Sirius, James, and Peter in the bunch.

Winky nodded. "Mistress's room was having many, many pictures of her family, Miss. I is thinking Harry Potter should like the same."

It suddenly came together for Ginny, and she turned to tell Harry, "We found the attic yesterday. It was full of boxes. They probably found these photos there."

"It's brilliant," Harry said, voice thick with the emotions he rarely displayed as he looked hard at the elves before turning back to the photos. "Best part of the house. Better than the Quidditch pitch, even."

Remus, Mrs. and Mr. Weasley, Hermione, and Ron arrived on time that night, trunks in hand. Ginny, Bill, Ded, and Harry were waiting in the main living room as they piled one-by-one out of the fireplace. Mr. Weasley and his wife came first, and Remus came last. He was the only one who didn't exclaim over the home, probably having seen it when James was the owner, but his eyes drank in the walls.

"Harry, you'll have to set up a password for the floo," Bill said, walking over to the younger man and helping him with the spells. Ded shook his hand afterward, and offered to show them around.

Mrs. Weasley's entire face had lit up when she saw the enormous kitchen, and beautiful breakfast room. It had only been a few weeks that Ginny had been there, but she felt oddly proud to have people so impressed with the house.

"Trunks is being in your rooms, and dinner is ready," Dobby announced to the group, and Ginny grinned.

They were all eating at the comfortable breakfast table where Remus said Harry's parents took all their meals, when Mr. Weasley raised his glass in toast.

"To Harry's new home. May it treat him well," he said.

"To my home," Harry said haltingly, as if the words were foreign to him, though his face lit up with pride. The house was everything that Grimmauld Place wasn't. "My family home."

The next few days provided a much needed break from studying for Ginny, who'd done entirely too much of that while staying at Spinner's End with just her brilliant oldest brother and Ded. Her mother had her running around the kitchen helping restock, her dad challenged her to a daddy-daughter chess tournament when he came home from work, and the Quidditch pitch was now Harry's common escape, with Ron flying with him and Hermione watching from the ground with a book in hand, meaning that Ginny had willing partners for a pick-up game any time she wanted.

Still, at night Ginny would find herself on the patio, school texts laid out on the wood table, enjoying the view and the peaceful study area. Often there was an unused quill and parchment waiting to be used to create the pile of essays she had been assigned.

“Starting your assignments early?” Harry asked, stepping out of his room to join her one night. Two metal kerosene lamps above his door turned on automatically.

“Nothing better to do at this hour,” Ginny said, kicking out a chair from the table for him to join her.

“Need any help?” Harry asked, sitting.

“You must be desperate to avoid Hermione and Ron if you’re willing to help me with essays,” Ginny said, leaning back and crossing her arms.

He looked guilty. “I’m not avoiding them.”

“Sure.”

Harry turned to watch the sea, still brightly lit by the long summer days; Ginny put down her quill and joined him, eyes on the white-tipped specks of waves.

“We should go some day,” Harry said. “To the beach. All of us.”

“That’s be fun,” Ginny agreed. “The only time I remember going to the shore, I was ten and Charlie was in charge of me for the day. He took me there by Floo because his girlfriend wanted to go, and tossed me in the cold water in all my clothes,” she said happily. It had been a good day, one of her happiest memories.

“My cousin pushed me into the public swimming pool once in all my clothes,” Harry said lightly, “but I don’t think it was meant to be fun.”

“Being pushed into water in all your clothes should always be fun. Like breaking a universal rule about swimwear,” Ginny said. “Have a better attitude.”

Harry laughed. "I'll try to remember that."

"Good."

"And you'll have to watch out whenever you walk by the lake, now that I know you're secretly hoping someone will give you a shove," Harry said, grinning.

"I was raised with six brothers. I'm always ready for a sneak attack around water." Which was completely true.

"No wonder you were so good at dodging curse in the D.A."

"And bludgers in Quidditch. Charlie was ruthless," she said, smiling as she picked up her quill again, and glanced at the page. Argh. She did not want to write this essay. Who cared about common mistakes in animal transfigurations? Ginny hadn't made one of them; She shouldn't have to write this essay.

"So what assignment are you working on?" Harry asked, twisting to look at her book.

"Transfiguration," she said, sliding the book toward him. "You want to write it?"

"I haven't started my own," he said, shaking his head. "But I could probably help you."

They slipped into an easy discussion of lessons, and Harry proved to be as good a teacher in other subjects as he was in Defense, though his understanding of Transfiguration wasn't as thorough.

But after that conversation, Ginny started to really notice how tense Harry was around his friends, worried and shifty. It wasn't like him. It wasn't like the Trio to have such a fissure. Or rather, it hadn't been like them in years, not since the Tri-wizard tournament debacle with Ron.



And now Harry looked lopsided and preoccupied both before and after Dumbledore came over to whisk Harry away for a few hours or a day, as he had throughout the break. Harry was keeping things from his friends, and it was eating him alive. Ginny could see that. Everyone could. But no one said anything.

Ginny considered confronting Harry, but decided that involving herself in his friendship with her brother and Hermione could only end badly. They could figure it out on their own. They always did.

Yet by his birthday, when the twins came over with a box bigger than Harry himself stuffed full of products and Mrs. Weasley had baked a cake almost as large, the Trio still weren't back to normal.

At the moment however, personal study projects and Harry Potter had been forgotten in favor of more mundane concerns. Ginny was rifling through her trunk trying to fish out all her uniform shirts for Hogwarts. Her mum had directed her to try them on so she would know if they still fit. Ginny had never had proper girls' blouses, always Percy's old ones, since he had the smallest build of all her brothers. It had never been a problem, at least until this spring, when she found them to be a bit too tight toward the top, and bunchy and unkempt at the bottom. She doubted that she would fit into them at all by now.

She tried them on, and sure enough, she could only button them half-way up. She wondered if she would be getting shirts from Ron or the twins this time, and cringed at how huge the shirts would be. Their arms were much longer than hers, and she would look ridiculous trying to tuck all that excess material into her skirt.

Maybe her next project should be learning how to alter clothes. But thinking about the amount of work she was already doing, she had no desire to add more.

Well, she never asked for anything. This year, she would have her own shirts, for crying out loud.

Changing back into her t-shirt (an old Gryffindor Quidditch shirt of Charlie's), she grabbed the offending articles and went downstairs, coming across a small crowd at the kitchen table, where everyone

tended to eat. Hermione, Ron, Harry, the twins, and Remus were all discussing the possibility of a trip to Diagon Alley once they received their Hogwarts letters. Mrs. Weasley was doing something at the sink.

"Mum," Ginny began.

"Yes, Ginny, dear?"

"I tried on the shirts. They don't fit anymore."

Her mother nodded, still scrubbing one last pot. "I'll have to look at some of Ron's old ones next time I'm at the Burrow."

Ginny's face fell, and she did not notice the attention of every other person in the room, though it was now trained on her.

"But, Mum, wearing Percy's was bad enough. Shirts for blokes aren't cut right. They're too long and there's way too much material to tuck in," Ginny pleaded.

Scrub. Scrub. Scrub went the pan. "Percy's shirts always looked just fine. I'm sure Ron's old ones will suit."

"Mum, I need girls' blouses, I'm telling you. Otherwise, I'll look ridiculous."

"You didn't look ridiculous last year," her mum reasoned. Was she being purposefully obtuse? Harry, Hermione, and Remus were starting to fidget uncomfortably. Ron and the twins, however, looked on with interest. It had been a while since the two Weasley women had gone at it, and now that Ginny was older, they were devilishly curious to see what would happen.

"Mum, you're the one who told me to try them on. I'm letting you know that they don't fit, and Ron's will look awful."

"Ginevra," Mrs. Weasley said with a warning tone. She was getting mad, too, now, though Ginny couldn't conceive of what on Merlin's green Earth she had to be ticked off about. "All of your brothers have

worn whatever they were given. I don't think it's too much to ask for you to do the same."

Bollocks. She thought Ginny was embarrassed about being poor. Honestly. If only that were the reason.

"Mum, I don't care about having to wear hand-me-downs, but I'm a girl. I can't wear boys' shirts. I don't see you wearing Dad's shirts, do I? No. Because you're not a bloke. And in case you failed to notice, I'm going to be fifteen tomorrow and I'm not a bloke either," she said, nodding toward her own breasts.

Her mother's face paled a bit as she realized exactly what Ginny meant. Molly Weasley had been the one to take Ginny on her first shopping trip for a training bra, but in the midst of the growing chaos and the move to Grimmauld Place and now Spinner's End, she'd seemed to completely miss her daughter storming through puberty.

The kitchen was filled with an awkward tension, and Ginny kept her eyes trained on her mum.

Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat and broke the horrifying silence. "Well. Perhaps you have a point."

Ginny smiled, and was about to say thanks, when Hermione interrupted.

"Well, Ginny could have my old shirts," Hermione offered, most likely in an attempt to diffuse the situation.

"Oh, thank you, Hermione, that's very nice of you," Mrs. Weasley said, eyeing Ginny chest. "But I think Ginny's a bit of a different size than you, dear."

Her comments could not have managed to create a more awkward tension in the room. Ginny's embarrassment on Hermione's behalf and her own was overwhelming, but she didn't want to turn around and make it worse by drawing attention to Hermione. Her mum was usually so good about these things, but she clearly wasn't on top of

her game right then. Talking about Ginny's period had been way less awkward than just asking for shirts. It was awful.

"I'll have to see what I can find at Diagon Alley," Mrs. Weasley said, smiling at her before turning back to finish the dishes. "I hadn't realized you'd become such a woman."

The snort from the kitchen table was definitely Ron, and this time Ginny did turn, narrowing her eyes at him and saying, "Michael did."

His face paused in confusion before it turned satisfyingly red and angry.

"What, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked in a polite tone.

"Nothing, Mum." Ginny smiled, in a considerably better mood now that she'd irritated Ron. "Thanks for understanding."

"Of course. Of course," Mrs. Weasley said, taking the shirts from her. "Let me see what I can do."

She bustled out of the room, and Remus was soon to follow, leaving just the kids. Ginny jumped onto a barstool.

"That was disgusting, Gin," Ron said, glaring.

"Totally uncalled for," Fred agreed.

"Revolting," George said, shaking his head at her.

"Too bad. I'm a girl. You all have to accept that," Ginny said, swinging her feet. As Ron, Fred, and George continued their tirade, Ginny noticed that Hermione looked highly amused and little proud of her, embarrassment completely gone. Harry, meanwhile, was silent, occasionally glancing at her before looking away. He even glanced at her boobs a few times, which was actually kind of gratifying. Yes, Harry. You should realize that I'm a girl too.

Despite enjoying that moment quite a bit, Ginny experienced an even better one when Remus found her studying in one of the living rooms the next day and said, "The plans for your birthday are set up."

Her eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Yes. Professor Dumbledore has arranged for us to use the Defense Room for a few hours."

She grinned at him. "You'll definitely win the prize for best birthday present."

"Unless someone else gives you new shirts, I presume." The smirk on his face was absolutely wolfish. This is why he and Sirius were friends, she mused. Bastard. But she was grinning. After all, she supposed it had been funny if you weren't a participant. She couldn't really blame the twins for being amused, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to exact retribution on them for laughing at her expense. She turned and glared at Remus.

"How does one man become so funny?" she asked, dripping with sarcasm. Remus laughed.

Remus went on to explain that Harry would be accompanying them to Hogwarts because the headmaster needed to speak with the three of them before she would be allowed to work on her magic. Curious, Ginny nodded in assent and pondered the potential reasons as she dressed for bed. Remus hadn't seemed to know what the visit was about either, and so she hadn't asked him.

On her birthday, Ginny woke up smiling.

After taking a shower and selecting some comfortable clothes to wear for her visit to Hogwarts, she went downstairs for breakfast. She assumed that Hermione was off reading in one of the dozen empty rooms in the mansion, because she had already been gone when Ginny arrived, and the only people eating breakfast were Harry and Remus.

"Morning, Remus, Harry," she said happily. Remus answered in kind.

"Morning," Harry said. Silence followed as Ginny served herself some eggs and toast. Remus looked at Harry like he was waiting for him to do something, but after a minute or two, apparently decided to proceed on his own.

"Happy birthday, Ginny," Remus said. She turned to him with a bright smile, as Harry's head jerked to attention, his eyes flicking back and forth between Remus and Ginny. He either hadn't known it was her birthday, or he had forgotten in the short time since she practically screamed it to her mother the day before.

"Thanks, Remus."

"It's your birthday?" Harry asked, clearly feeling bad about not knowing.

She grinned, trying to show she didn't mind. "Every year."

"Sorry. I knew it was near mid-August, I just—" Harry shook his head and then said clearly, "Happy birthday, Ginny."

"Thanks, Harry."

They finished their meals relatively quickly, and cleared their plates.

"Ready?" Remus asked, pulling out a bag of gummy bears. "We're going by Portkey. It's set for about a minute from now, so get a hand on it." Ginny and Harry did as they were told, and it wasn't long before the familiar tug behind the navel had dumped them right into Dumbledore's office. The headmaster was seated at his desk, and Fawkes was perched nearby.

"Hullo, Fawkes," Ginny greeted the phoenix, as she was standing nearest to him. He was still in the youth stage of his current life, but close to fully-grown. They all sat down in three comfortable-looking chairs that Dumbledore must have conjured.

"Happy birthday, Ginny," Dumbledore said. Ginny smiled and thanked him.

Dumbledore settled back in his chair, soft old hands on the desk. “I realize this is a sensitive subject, but I have a few things of Sirius’s to give to you three.”

Now Ginny’s curiosity was definitely piqued.

“I thought the will covered everything,” Harry said warily.

“It should have for all the headaches it caused,” Remus murmured, and Harry nodded. Ginny supposed there must have been more going on behind the scenes than she hadn’t realized.

“Are they still trying to take it all back?” Harry asked. “It’s not like I wanted it in the first place.”

“No, Harry. The issue with the gold and lands is settled,” Professor Dumbledore said. “The appropriate amounts have been transferred to your family account and to Remus’s. When you gain access to your family vaults on your seventeen birthday, you will be able to use it as you like.”

Ginny was trying not to feel like a total voyeur, and wondered why on Earth Dumbledore had requested her to be here for this.

“The last piece of his estate involves letters which Sirius wrote to the three of you,” Dumbledore said.

Ginny was quite shocked. There was a storm of emotion brewing inside of her now, and she was glad to be at Hogwarts in the event that her magic grew out of hand. It was not long before she felt the familiar energy coursing through her limbs. She squirmed in her chair for a second, before bracing herself against it for support.

Dumbledore took out three letters. Harry’s, naturally, looked to be quite a bit longer than the other two. Each of them reached toward Dumbledore’s desk to retrieve the sealed packet with their name on it.

Ginny just held hers for a moment before looking up at the headmaster. “This is probably going to make me emotional, no matter

what it says. In fact, I'm already feeling emotional, so I may blow something up."

"I daresay I have too many possessions as it is."

Ginny saw Harry's head jerk up toward Dumbledore. He looked at her suspiciously, back at Dumbledore, and then went back to his letter.

With trembling hands, Ginny opened her own. When she saw the words "Dear Ginny," in Sirius's handwriting, she felt a tide of sadness wash over her. She immediately clapped a hand to her mouth, took a breath, and left her chair to sit on the floor in between some bookcases, where she would be slightly obscured from view. Once she calmed herself a bit, she took a deep breath and opened the letter again.

Dear Ginny,

It seems I have died. Pity, that. I hope it was a spectacular end, at least. If not, make up something good, would you? I don't want people thinking the aurors bested me or something pathetic like that. Remus will probably tell people something logical and boring, like the truth, but I know you'll do me proud.

It was always fun to have you at the house. You reminded me of me, actually. You'll never know how grateful I was to meet you, the littlest Weasley who blasted me with a Bat-Bogey Hex when she thought I was her brother spying on her. Impressed me right away with that, let me tell you. Kept impressing me when you dared to stay and talk to the escaped convict for all those late night chats.

So I know you won't be offended when I mention that I know Voldemort hurt you. He's a right bastard. Always has been. Took away a lot of good people. (Hopefully not me; hopefully I rip up this letter and write a new one soon, but if you're reading it then that's probably not what happened). But you should be proud of yourself. Not everyone can say they survived a personal attack from Voldemort. But you did. You and Harry both.



She was so overwhelmed, she could barely read for the hurricane of magic crashing around inside her. The power had filled her abdomen, and out through her arms, and for the first time it flowed down her legs as well. It was all she could do to hold off an explosion; of herself, or something in the room, she didn't know.

You surprised me, actually. I expected a girl with all those brothers to be coddled, but that was hardly you. In fact, my ears are still ringing from your last screeching match with Molly (which you won, naturally). Maybe it's something about the hair, but when you lot were here for Christmas, and you got in Harry's face about being possessed by Voldemort, I swore I was seeing Lily and James again. You seemed just as fearless as they ever were. They were the ones who told me that real friends don't tell you what you want to hear, they tell you what you need to hear. Even when it's that you're in love with them.

BANG!

She jumped. The planet Jupiter in a model of the solar system had exploded on the other side of the room. Fawkes looked at the mess it made on the floor, and looked back at her reprovingly. Ginny caught her breath and resumed reading, having felt the magic recede back to her stomach.

I'm not an expert at relationships. Or people. I mean, I am brilliant, and people do love me, but figuring out how you felt about Harry was hardly advanced Arithmancy. Lily hid how she felt about James for years and all they did was get mad at each other when they found out. So don't do that. It's different, of course. Harry has a big responsibility and he thinks he has to do it all alone because he is just as stubborn as his parents. Don't let him do that. I know you, at least, are up to that challenge.

She stopped reading for a second, and sighed. She could already feel the swell building up again. His handwriting was a testament to his polished upbringing, no matter what words he used, and his confidence in her was disarming. She figured it would be better to explode things now, where the adults knew about her powers, rather than back at headquarters where people would ask questions. She'd just have to apologize and make up some excuse to tell Harry.

Oh, and if Moony is moping, as I'm sure he will, kick his arse for me. I'll tell Harry the same in his letter, but he's too polite to beat up his old professor.

I don't know what else to say. Lily was the one who made me write letters like this to people during the war, and I read the ones I wrote when I was nineteen and promptly burned them before writing these improved ones. I thought to write you because you really made me feel happy in this house, you little outcast. I don't know what good a stupid letter will do, but I'm stuck in this house and don't have anything else to do, so its just as well, right?

I still have dozens of things on my To Do Before My Untimely But Spectacular Death list, but going out in a blaze of glory was always a must. And I expect nothing less from you.

Hope you never have to read this,

Sirius

CRACK!

A large mirror shattered, and Ginny jumped again, but Professor Dumbledore was already putting it back together, and she couldn't really care at that point.

How odd to think of Sirius writing this letters in his precise, perfect script. How odd to think that she may have meant as much to him as he had to her, despite their significant age difference. They had, after all, both known what it was like to a prisoner and not want to talk about it.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her forehead against them, breathing deeply.

Ginny had grown up hearing stories about the Potters—the untouchable, unbreakable Potters and their tiny heroic son. Seeing Harry for the first time had been like stepping into a storybook,

learning that legends breathed and walked among us. It seemed, she thought, as though she had always been gazing up at him.

But Sirius Black had been another matter altogether: escaped convict, murderer-turned-innocent. She'd been surprised to find him laughing after she hexed Ron at Grimmauld Place, but even more surprised to see in his silver eyes something recognizable.

Ginny didn't know how long she sat on the floor of the headmaster's office like that, finally letting herself feel sad, but it seemed like forever. When she was calm enough, she re-read the letter and folded it back into its original form. She wiped her eyes and peeked out of her hiding place to find her companions. It appeared that Dumbledore had kindly left them to read in relative privacy.

Harry was staring out into space, letter held tightly in his hands, tense and unwavering. He looked devastated, but wasn't crying. He seemed to be out of tears. Remus had his eyes closed and covered by one of his hands, as he remained in his chair next to Harry.

Sirius would have hated this, Ginny thought suddenly. Well, he might have liked the spectacle. Definitely would have loved that she blew up two of the headmaster's things, but seeing his godson and best mate in so much pain would have made him want to punch a wall.

Well, too bad, Sirius. Your stupid cousin bested you, and we couldn't help, so now you're gone and we get to be sad. We get to cry.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wall. Yes, she was allowed to feel sad.

Many, many minutes later, she opened her eyes at the feeling of something touching—or rather, perching, as it turned out—on her knee. She blinked to see Fawkes on her still bent knee, and looked up to find Harry watching her. Remus was in the far end of the room speaking quietly with Dumbledore. She smiled at the phoenix, who flew the short distance back to his perch, and then turned again to Harry.

"I didn't know you were friends with Sirius," Harry said, curious and interested, still wanting to know more about the man who had been like a father to him.

"Yeah, well, before you came last summer, we were stuck there all the time, and we were both pretty frustrated at being left out. We bonded in our resentment."

Harry looked even more guilty now, probably because he was remembering what a prat he had been the summer before and hadn't considered that other people were frustrated or lonely, too.

"I didn't know."

"That's alright. I mean, we weren't exactly friends then, you and I," she replied, shrugging. Harry seemed a bit taken aback by her statement, but he didn't get a chance to reply, as right then Remus and Dumbledore turned their attention to the two teenagers.

"Ginny, why don't we head out for a while. Professor Dumbledore needs to speak to Harry." He smiled warmly at her, and it was a huge relief to Ginny after having seen him in anguish a little while ago.

"You bet." She stood up and turned to Dumbledore. "Thank you, professor. I really appreciate you keeping my letter for me."

She shook his hand, as always, gave Fawkes a smile, and turned to leave. Harry was wearing the latest in a series of befuddled expressions where she was concerned, probably in reaction to her blunt comment, but perhaps also the ease and familiarity with which she interacted with the headmaster.

"See you later, Harry."

"See you, Ginny."

Remus said they'd be back in a few hours, nodded to Harry, and followed Ginny out of the office. They walked in companionable silence for a few minutes, until Remus spoke.

“Dumbledore is going to have lunch sent up to the Defense Room.”

“I’m starting to be really spoiled by house-elves,” she said wryly.

“I assume that Jupiter and the mirror were your doing?”

“At this rate, you should just put me in a padded cell,” Ginny said, shaking her head. They were both determined, it seemed, to act as normal as possible. That was fine with Ginny. The letter reading had been a private thing for both of them. And she could pretend things were normal better than almost anyone.

“I think part of the reason Dumbledore brought us here, instead of bringing our letters to Spinner’s End, was in case your magic did something like that.”

“So at least my destructiveness was minimally contained.” Ginny nodded in understanding.

“Have you thought about what you’d like to practice today?” he asked, as they turned the last corner before the hallway where the Defense room was located.

“The Patronus Charm, obviously,” she listed. “I was thinking maybe Protego, Impedimenta, some basic defense spells that would be helpful if I ever got myself into a fix without a wand.”

Remus nodded. “Being able to do a wandless Shield Charm would probably be very useful.”

They arrived at the entrance to the room, and Remus opened the door for her. There were dummies set up, and thick pillows on the floor. A table and two chairs were set up for lunch with a fresh array of lunchtime foods. They walked over immediately and sat down to eat.

“Ginny,” Remus said, looking up from his food and breaking their silent agreement, “I’m sorry we had to read those letters on your birthday.”

“Why?” Ginny asked, surprised. “I mean, sure, I was sad and my magic broke some of the headmaster’s things, but I can’t think of a better gift than receiving a letter from someone I thought I’d never hear from again. It was nice that he even thought to write me.”

To her surprise, she now meant it.

“Sirius said you talked to him without fear,” Remus said.

“Well, he wasn’t actually guilty,” she said.

“That didn’t stop a lot of people from fearing him. He spent twelve years in Azkaban.”

“And then he escaped,” she said firmly. That was the part of the story that mattered.

“The greatest prank he ever pulled, I think your twin brothers said,” Remus said, clearly trying to lighten the mood. It worked.

“Yeah. The twins thought Sirius was brilliant and constantly had note-taking quills following them around when they were near him. It was a little unhealthy.” Ginny wanted to keep him from thinking sadder thoughts. “If we go to Diagon Alley for our school things, you’ll have to go to their store with me. Their biggest regret was not realizing what a prankster you were while you taught them.”

Remus smiled. “They knew enough not to prank in my classroom.”

“They told me that you always thwarted their plans. Even made a balloon backfire once, didn’t you?”

Remus nodded. “But unfortunately, I don’t think any of you children will be going to Diagon Alley this summer. Security being what it is, we can’t spare the Aurors it would take to escort Harry, let alone all of you. We’ll have to have your mother collect everything again.”

“She’s very good at things like that,” Ginny said.

He nodded and changed the subject, "Are you anxious to get your Hogwarts letter? I'd think you'd be in the running for Gryffindor Prefect."

"Nah. I mean, I'm probably in the running, but I don't want it. I'm not one to set much store by the rules, and I wouldn't be all that keen to enforce them. Who am I to give people detention for being out after curfew, when I'm out after curfew all the time? I don't fancy being a hypocrite, and there's other things I'd rather be doing than going to Prefect meetings."

He smirked. "You'd be surprised how many prefects felt that way until my seventh year."

"Why?"

"Because the meetings were boring. But then Harry's parents became Head Boy and Girl, and suddenly prefect meetings were the coolest place to be in Hogwarts. Prefects left looking as if they'd come from a party."

"Did they manage to accomplish anything?"

"Oh, they kept the school running like clockwork because everyone liked and respected them so much, but they also played board games, gave away prizes, had practice duels, ate cake, and had a competition to see who could avoid giving a detention an entire year." Remus shook his head. "Lily herself won when James was forced to cite a couple of Ravenclaws for... oh, I don't remember. I think they were trying to break down the door to the staff quarters."

Ginny smiled. "Sounds fun. And nothing like what Hermione and Ron go through."

Remus shook his head. "No. I wouldn't imagine that tradition would continue."

"Wish it had. Might have tried harder to show my leadership ability then," Ginny said, smiling. Remus smiled too, and wiped his mouth

with his napkin. They had finished eating, and it was time for the good stuff.

They stood together facing the empty defense room.

“Let’s start with seeing your Levitation Charm,” he said, nodding toward a pillow on the opposite side of the room.

She cast the spell, and the patch of pillows rose into the air, about a fourth as high up as she’d intended.

“Try to aim for a single one,” Remus said, but it proved to be rather impossible. While she was fine moving the entire pile around, she couldn’t single out just one.

“I moved just one pot,” Ginny complained. “I don’t see why—Oh. I was only using a finger.”

She pointed a single finger, and only two pillows moved, a vast improvement.

“Wandless magic,” Remus said, conjuring a small fire into the palm of his hand as he had on the train her second year when the Dementors came aboard, “extends from your body. It isn’t a choice how narrow or wide the field is. It’s your magic, leaking out of you.”

“Sounds pleasant,” Ginny said sarcastically, growing frustrated as she tried to lift just one pillow again, and failed.

“Focus on a single thread on the pillow,” Remus said. “Try to levitate the smallest piece of thread.”

Well, that was different. She closed her eyes to focus, and then tried his strategy. It worked. The pink pillow lifted slowly, effortlessly.

“Excellent,” she said. So she needed to think small. As happened in her classes, once she understood this basic concept, applying it to the rest of her spells was unexpectedly easy. Instead of banishing the pillow, she banished a piece of the cotton inside the pillow. The only



spell she discovered she didn't have to modify was Summoning her wand. It came almost without thought.

"Working with Cheering Charms and the like will be harder," Ginny said, thinking about how she could specify it to a single person. "Unless I wanted to influence an entire group with a spell that's a quarter as strong as I hoped."

Expelliarmus proved too difficult for her at first. The spell seemed to dissipate into the air and have no effect on Remus at all, which was annoying.

"It shouldn't be this hard," Ginny said, casting the spell with her wand and snatching his wand out of the air. "See? Easy."

"Your arm is too wide again. Try to take my hand from this hand. Focus," he insisted. So she did. She stared at the tip of his wand and tried again. This time, the wand jumped from his hand.

"Won't exactly be helpful in a duel if I need to focus that closely," Ginny said. "They'll expect it."

"Not if they think you're disarmed," Remus said. "Or aren't paying attention."

"So if I'm ever held captive and being taunted by people who don't know what I'm capable of, I can take all the time I like between tortures," Ginny agreed, nodding. "That'll be nice."

Remus didn't respond. After learning some things about Harry's parents, Ginny would regret that she had been so cavalier about the idea of kidnapping and torture. Remus had seen many of his friends immerge against the odds with bruises and cuts and trauma from enemy hands. He didn't need a fifteen-year-old girl to make light of that, no matter how patient he was.

"I think you figured out the secret. The rest of the spells shouldn't cause you much trouble now, I expect." He dragged a small table over and placed it in front of her. "Why don't you try a Reducto curse, first time without your wand. Don't worry about being fast; once you

get used to going through the motions, you'll be able to do it much quicker. For now we just want you to be able to control it. Focus on a single piece of wood or a single leg."

Ginny nodded, and Remus moved out of the way. But the spell she cast barely made a crack in the table.

"I blasted Mrs. Black's portrait and blew up things in the headmaster's office, and this is all I can do to a stupid Muggle table," she said, shaking her head.

"You were feeling very strong emotions at those times," Remus said, "and as odd as it is, I think that may have affected your magic. Try thinking of something emotional, then cast the spell."

Well, that seemed like a fine enough plan. Ginny started thinking about Sirius and the letter he had written to her, and immediately felt her power beginning to rise. She directed it into a tight ball with her mind, and pointed at the table.

"Reducto!"

The tabletop exploded.

"Excellent!" Remus said. Ginny turned and smiled at her former teacher. She thought for a moment how sad it was that he couldn't be a teacher anymore on account of his being a werewolf. It was really quite a shame because he was brilliant at it.

They went through several more spells—a levitation charm, Alohomora, a severing spell, a vanishing spell, Nox, Lumos, Impedimenta, a stunner, Ennervate, and a shield charm. Each one proved weaker when she cast it without first tapping into her emotions. She used irritation, anger, sadness, and memories of the Chamber to enhance the spell.

Bet Tom never imagined I'd be able to use his work this way.

It was validating to know that despite the awfulness of that experience, she was taking advantage of it. Except Protego. The

shield charm caused her some problems, mainly because she wasn't sure where to aim when she wanted the shield to build itself around her and not around someone else. After the third time didn't work, Remus stepped in.

"Why don't you try picturing yourself in your mind, and make that image the target of your shield."

Ginny nodded and closed her eyes. She gathered her magic into a tight ball, she thought the spell, *Protego*, and pictured herself in her mind. Before she could even say the incantation aloud, she felt the magic expend itself into erecting the shield. She opened her eyes to find Remus grinning.

"Is my shield up?" she asked, puzzled.

"Yes, I believe it is. Hold on a second." And he cast a tickling charm, which quickly bounced off the shimmering outline of her shield.

"Wow, I didn't even have to say it out loud!"

"That'll come in handy when you have to learn non-verbal spells in sixth year Defense. You'll already know the basic concept. Have you been reading ahead?"

"I have, but I don't know anything about non-verbal spells," Ginny said. "I just did it."

Remus watched her carefully. "You've never studied non-verbal spells?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Just sort of came to me."

Remus didn't look as thrilled as she was, and finally settled on asking, "Are you ready to try a Patronus?"

Ginny shook her head. "I'd like to revel in my accomplishments a bit more before I fail to make a Patronus again."

Remus looked at his watch. "How long with this reveling take?"

Ginny frowned. "I'm done now. Your lack of enthusiasm ruined it."

He smiled fiendishly. "Okay. Let's see you cast the spell."

Ginny could have kicked herself for not recognizing his lack of response as a means of manipulation. Remus was a clever one.

Remus nodded for her to go. "Walk me through it with you."

"All right. First the happy memory." Ginny closed her eyes and tried to think of the happiest moments of her life. There weren't many, to be honest, but she thought of two right away: catching the Snitch to win the Quidditch Cup last year, and Harry rescuing her from the Chamber of Secrets. Since the latter was so closely connected to some not-so-happy memories, she went with the former.

"And now the spell," she said, picturing herself stealing the Snitch from the clutches of Cho Chang. She raised her wand. "Expecto Patronum!"

A bright wisp of white smoke stretched out ten meters in front of her, but no true Patronus. Maybe she should have used the other memory. She turned to Remus.

"And there went my happy mood," she said, shaking her head.

"You have to use a happier memory," he said.

"That one was pretty good," Ginny said, grinning at the thought.

"Think of a time when you've felt overwhelmed with happiness. Not a momentary burst of emotion, but a memory that still makes you feel strongly, years after the fact, just remembering what happened," he said.

Well, that immediately made her think of one, single memory: lying on the cold damp floor of the Chamber, staring up at the fading cave as everything was going blurry. She had been about to die and she knew it, and Tom Riddle, her best friend, was doing the killing.

She was so deeply involved in the memory that she didn't even notice how her power began to rise and swell in her gut.

In the haze of darkness, it had felt like she was being pulled apart. Memories of Tom Riddle's life and her own jumbled together into one: an orphanage, a cave, two boys on the ground, the Burrow, and a Quidditch game with Charlie. But all the memories were fading. Everything was fading. And she felt so very tired. Then she felt the draining stop, and she blinked her dry, tired eyes to see the hazy outline of a black-haired boy standing above her looking like he'd jumped into a pile of slime, holding a sword as big as he was. He might have been Tom except for his intense green eyes. And then he said a single word—her name—and the world was safe again.

"Expecto Patronum!" Her own voice startled her out of her reverie, and as she opened her eyes to see if she'd been successful, she heard Remus gasp.

What she saw made her freeze.

What she saw wasn't a dragon like Charlie's Patronus or a horse like she thought it might be. It wasn't an otter like Hermione's, or a wolf like Remus's. No, the symbol of Ginny's protector was none other than an exact replica of Harry's stag. An exact copy.

The stag stopped, turned, and walked back toward Ginny and Remus, who stood respectively glaring and stuck dumb by what they were seeing.

Ginny was so preoccupied with the form her Patronus had taken that she hadn't even noticed that she performed the spell with the wrong hand—the one without her wand. The Patronus dissolved, and out of the corner of her eye Ginny saw Remus turn to her.

"Don't say it," she said, trying to stave off the inevitable. "I'm living in a bubble of denial, and you're just going to ruin it."

"Have you heard the stories?" he asked.

"Of course I have. Every stupid child knows what having replica Patronuses means," Ginny said, defeated. She wished she were more inclined toward self-delusion. If she could just convince herself that the Patronuses were merely similar rather than identical, her life would be a lot easier. But she couldn't. Damn. "My bubble is gone."

"Harry might not," Remus offered, blatantly trying to console her.

"Might not recognize that we have the same Patronus?" she asked, trying to sound light. "It would be hard to overlook."

"No. Not that," Remus said gently. "I meant that he might not know the stories."

"Everyone knows the story of the Twin Patronuses," Ginny said, feeling torn between proud of herself for making this Patronus and worried that it would broadcast to the world the feelings she had so carefully tucked away from public sight. "Matching Patronuses proved to the princess that the prince was her true love and not merely controlled by a love potion. It's so cliché that it's sickening."

"It's not a Muggle tale," Remus said, which made Ginny stop for a moment. Harry had been raised as a Muggle. Maybe he hadn't heard that story. Maybe no one had mentioned it to him in the last six years because they were too old to make believe. Maybe she was just lucky enough that she could get away with this Patronus without letting him know that she hadn't ever actually stopped liking him.

"But if any pureblood saw my Patronus and Harry's, they'd probably tell him what it means," she said quickly, eying her old professor.

"Probably," he admitted, which was not exactly comforting.

"Then I just won't show anyone. I'll pretend I can't do it, and they'll just think I'm Defensively-stunted or something," she said, warming up to the idea. "That'll be fine."

"Unless you face a Dementor," Remus said.

"In that case, everyone would probably be too distracted by the Dementor to care what my little Patronus looked like," she said, waving a hand dismissively. "You just have to agree not to tell anyone."

"I won't say anything, Ginny." And without even thinking about it, he walked over to her, and for once he gave her a hug, instead of the other way around. Maybe he knew something about unrequited love, Ginny thought, or at least about the humiliation of a secret being broadcast so clearly to the world.

The Twin Patronuses, of course, told everyone that she was in love with the person with the original Patronus. Like obsessive, long-term, painful, unchanging love. The kind of thing she had planned to hide from Harry for at least a decade.

Stop harping on the negatives, Weasley, and just focus on handling it. Pull it together.

She was just about convinced that she could make this work when they heard a pop and turned around to see Fawkes landing on the back of a chair. Ginny walked over to the phoenix and stroked the bird's head in greeting.

"Does Professor Dumbledore want us back in his office?" she asked. Fawkes opened his beak and trilled in response. At the lovely sound, Ginny felt somewhat better. She turned back to Remus.

"Ready to go?" he asked. Ginny nodded. She gave Fawkes one last pat on the head, and the phoenix disappeared. Remus walked up next to her and they exited the room.

"It'll be fine," she said. "I'm going to make this work. Without humiliating either Harry or myself."

Remus smiled, but she didn't see it. "Try not to worry about it right now. He's probably going to find out about it sooner or later, but you might as well not dwell on it until he does. Okay?"

"You are not being comforting right now," Ginny said.

"Tonks says I need to work on how I relate to witches," Remus admitted, which made Ginny grin, thinking of the purple-haired Auror.

"You weren't a ladies man at Hogwarts?" Ginny asked.

"I actually got along the best with girls out of all of my friends. But none of us had many female friends at school," Remus said.

"You were a little busy becoming illegal animagi and hiding a huge secret," Ginny allowed.

"Exactly. It kept girlfriends at a minimum."

"How many were there?"

"Almost none," Remus said, shaking his head. "I went to Hogsmeade with a couple of girls. Peter did too. But Sirius and James were too busy becoming illegal animagi to be distracted by girls."

That seemed so odd. "What about Harry's mum?"

"Well, that's a whole different story," Remus said. "Lily was always in her own category."

It seemed that a lot of people felt that way about the mysterious Lily Potter, whom so many spoke of fondly yet vaguely.

"Here's something to consider," Remus said as the statue of the gargoyle came into sight. "Think of what you want to say to Harry about the random objects that exploded while you read your letter." Ginny had forgotten about that.

"I don't suppose I could just hand him a helpful pamphlet on wandless magic that you have on hand?" she suggested.

Remus smiled. "I think he might want a bit more detail than a pamphlet."

"Selfish. That's what he is," Ginny muttered.



"Ice Mice," Remus recited, and the doorway to the headmaster's office opened. They stood on the stairs and waited as they rose to the inner entrance. Harry opened the door just as Remus went to knock on it.

Ginny's brows knit together when Harry's eyes immediately went to her. He got a disconcerted look on his face, which she ignored. She gave him a small smile, hoping to indicate that everything was okay. Remus entered last and shut the door behind them.

"I trust you had a productive time," Dumbledore said. Ginny and Remus shot each other a look, and Ginny snorted with derision as she pictured her Patronus in her mind. Remus smiled, and Harry looked even more confused.

"Oh, yes. Learned loads. Bonded over spells," Ginny answered glibly. Confident humor confused and distracted people.

The headmaster nodded. "Are you ready to return to Spinner's End?"

Well, he was certainly hustling them out of there quickly.

"Actually, Professor, I wanted to explain something to Harry before we go."

Dumbledore motioned for her to proceed, but when she turned to look at Harry, she was so caught up in his concentrated gaze for a second that she almost forgot what to say until Remus subtly coughed.

"Right. You probably noticed that when we were reading our letters from Sirius earlier, the model of Jupiter exploded, and then a bit later the mirror shattered." Harry nodded. "That was me."

"You blew up the headmaster's things?" he asked curiously.

"Not on purpose," she said. "I'm not malicious. Just out of control."

"So it was accidental magic?" Harry asked, glancing at the headmaster. "Like what happened to Aunt Marge?"

“Was that the aunt you blew up?” Ginny had heard the story second-hand from both Ron and Sirius (who technically gave third-hand accounts, actually).

“Ginny,” Remus gently said, reminded her to stay on task. Good man, that Remus.

“Sorry. The point is, it happened because I can do wandless magic,” Ginny said, watching for Harry’s reaction.

Eyes steadily watching her as if she were a new brand of plant which he’d never encountered before, Harry seemed to be processing a lot of information in a short time. She wasn’t exactly sure what he was thinking about, and so she was surprised when he said, “Is that how you silenced the portrait of Mrs. Black?”

Ginny bit her cheek. “Yeah. I tend to break things when I’m emotional, and she was saying some awful things. Not that I regret it. I regret that I didn’t accidentally make her burst into flames, if anything.”

Harry smirked. “I think silencing her was a pretty good punishment.”

“She did like to hear her own voice,” Ginny said. She would never admit the way the silent pleading of the portrait haunted her.

Harry hesitated, then added, “I didn’t know you felt that strongly about her.”

“Well,” Ginny said, “that’s probably because you don’t know me very well.”

Once again, the boy looked taken aback by her honest statement. She shook her head in disbelief. Sure, her Patronus might know that she was in love with him and his haunted, beautiful eyes, but all Harry seemed to know about her was that she was Ron’s sister and the girl he had rescued from the Chamber of Secrets. It was rather sad that they were so lopsided.

Harry, meanwhile, looked at his parchment from Sirius and back to her face before admitting, "I guess I don't."

It was a minor triumph, sure. One that would probably be undermined the moment they both went back to Spinner's End, but Ginny was going to accept it. Maybe going to the Ministry together, playing on the same Quidditch team, fighting in the D.A., and spending the summer together could be the beginning of a new friendship. She'd certainly appreciate that.

"Does your family know about this?" Harry asked suddenly, nodding toward her hands. "About the wandless magic, I mean."

"Only Fred and George. So if you could not tell anyone, that would be great." Harry started at this last revelation, but paused to consider her request. Finally he nodded.

"Alright." He paused. "I'll keep your secret." As he finished, he looked up at her earnestly. He knew all too well what she was trying to avoid.

"Thanks, Harry. That makes five that know, six counting Dobby." She turned briefly to the headmaster.

The headmaster waited to see if they were finished before saying, "If that is all, you may floo back to Spinner's End from my fire. Miss Weasley, if you would stay behind for a moment."

Remus entered the oversized fireplace, and threw down his floo powder. The End had been put on the Floo Network, but only to Hogwarts.

"Spinner's End!" And he was gone. Harry stepped in, powder in hand, and glanced at Ginny with a strange expression on his face.

"See you in a bit, Gin. Bye, professor. Spinner's End!" And then there were two.

"I hope I did not ruin your birthday, Miss Weasley. That was certainly not my intention."

"Birthdays are very durable. It would take more than an unexpected letter to ruin," Ginny said. "And an entire wandless magic training session was great."

The headmaster smiled, then turned around and retrieved a rather large box from behind his desk. It was wrapped like a present. Sweet.

"I have one more gift for you, but it would be best to open this when you are alone." Dumbledore shrank the box so that it was the size of a thimble, and handed it to Ginny.

A secret gift. Even better.

"Thank you, professor." Ginny put the present in her front pocket, moving her letter from Sirius to her back pocket. Dumbledore smiled.

"You ought to see the gift before your thanks are given."

"Even if it's lousy, I'd still pretend to love it. You are the headmaster, after all." She smiled. "But I have a feeling I'll love it for real."

His eyes twinkled. He smiled. She would see why later. She grabbed some floo powder and walked into the fireplace.

"Goodbye, professor. Spinner's End!" And back she went.

She tumbled out of the fireplace, and landed at someone's feet. However, it was completely impossible to know whose feet she was sprawled out over, since it was pitch black in the room.

But not for long.

"Surprise!"

The lights came back on with a vengeance, and Ginny was blinking as her eyes adjusted. She looked up to see that the feet currently acting as a cushion belonged to her brother, Bill.

"Happy birthday, you little blackmailer," he said, smiling as he helped her up.

“Happy birthday, Gin,” Harry said beside him, grinning broadly. Had he known all along that it was her birthday? She narrowed her eyes. She wasn’t sure he was that good an actor.

“Thanks, Harry.” Standing so close to him, she really noticed how much he had grown in the last few months. Neither of them was a scrawny, gangly kid anymore. Both of them had filled out quite nicely, as a matter of fact, and both seemed to be taking a moment in appreciation.

“What are you doing still falling out of the floo like a child?” Charlie asked, shaking his head as he stepped forward.

“Hoping to bowl over upstart brothers who don’t even wish me a proper happy birthday,” she said, hugging him.

“No fair!” Fred said, elbowing his way in front of Charlie. “I’m your favorite brother. Stop talking to the lesser ones.”

“Please,” George said, rolling his eyes at his twin. “Everyone knows I’m her favorite.”

The two bantered for a while, and Bill pointed to himself behind their backs, mouthing, I know it’s me, before sliding away. Charlie looked on, amused, and Ron yanked her off the ground with one of his rib-crushing embraces that she enjoyed so much.

“Grow a little this year, would you?” Ron asked. “It’s starting to be sad, how much shorter you are than everyone else in the family.”

After everyone had greeted Ginny, and all the guests had been allowed to mingle and talk for a while, they all moved to the dining room and sat down for what appeared to be the biggest dinner to be hosted at Spinner’s End in quite some time.

The table was old, wooden and extremely long with high-backed chairs that were probably the height of fashion a few hundred years ago. Now the twins had wrapped long ribbons of pink and white and

gold around all of them, and there were blinking spots of lights flashing all over the room.

“Nice decorations,” she whispered to Fred as she sat at the very center of the table.

“We had to fight Winky’s cleaning the entire time,” Fred said, snapping a party hat onto her head.

“Glad to know you bested a two-foot tall waif of an elf,” she said and he made his way to his own chair.

The table was full with all of Ginny’s brothers (except Percy), her parents, Harry, Hermione, Tonks, Remus, Mad-Eye, and Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet, who had joined the Order recently after leaving school. It made sense that Harry, who’d known them through Quidditch, would feel comfortable having them over.

Apparently the Gryffindor Quidditch team is a feeder to the ranks of the Order of the Phoenix, Ginny mused as she ate and talked laughingly with her brothers. There were seven past members that she knew of, and at least three future members who’d played Quidditch. One of the benefits was that Harry was instantly comfortable with both girls, sitting and talking to them easily. Teams were like that, thought Ginny. Teammates were close. Or should be. It was why Harry got along best with the twins, probably.

Dinner was a jovial affair, but the moment the plates had been cleared, Ron yelled, “Presents now!”

Charlie glared at him, and the twins’ faces broke out into grins while Bill tried to hide his smile.

“What’s going on?” Ginny asked. Her brothers always teased her before presents, saying that the ones she’d gotten them on their birthdays weren’t good enough to warrant gifts on hers. It was a tradition.

“Nothing,” the twins said, but they sounded like they were lying. Harry, Alicia, and Angelina were also watching with barely hidden interest. They were in on it.

As her gifts—there appeared to be five—were brought into the kitchen, she felt around her pocket to make sure that Dumbledore’s was still there. It was. She turned to the array before her.

The first present she noticed was easily the biggest. It was almost as long as she was tall, and about two feet wide. She wondered who it was from until she noticed all the familiar signatures scrawled over the top of the wrapping.

“I think you should open that one,” Bill said, nodding toward a medium-sized package in the middle.

“No!” Ron cried out, making her grin.

“No?” she asked, ignoring Bill, who was rolling his eyes, in favor of Ron. “Ron, do you think that I should start with the big one that seems to be from all my brothers?”

“Yep,” Ron said, pushing it gently toward her, despite his eagerness.

She grinned wickedly at Bill and said, “Nice try.”

“It would have worked,” Bill said.

“Nope, I’m too suspicious of you, you manipulator.”

“Ginny, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said. “Why don’t you start?”

“Sure, Mum,” Ginny said, turning to the four remaining packages. The twins settled back in their chairs, arms crossed. Ron scowled. Bill patiently accepted this, and Charlie looked proud of her.

From Hermione she got a set of Muggle athletic clothes made by someone named “Nike.” Hermione explained that she could use them to train for Quidditch. Ginny thanked her for the surprisingly thoughtful

gift, including the new sports bra. It was the closest she supposed Hermione would ever come to giving a Quidditch gift.

From her parents, Ginny received a set of elegant, Wedgwood-blue dress robes, which were very nice despite being second hand. Tonks gave her a new, dark-gray messenger bag for school, which Ginny really liked (and needed), and Remus got her a brilliant set of parchment that allowed the writer to communicate with their friends when they couldn't talk. He explained that when one person wrote on one piece, the message would show up on the other pieces, and that he, Sirius, and Harry's dad had used similar devices when they were at Hogwarts.

Thanking her parents, Tonks, and Remus for their kindness, she turned back to the huge gift from her brothers.

"Alright, blokes. I'm ready now." She smiled excitedly and scanned the signatures for the writing of each brother, checking each one off as she found them. Her breath caught as she saw one autograph she wasn't expecting.

Happy 15th Birthday, Ginevra

The enclosed should make for a successful

year at Hogwarts. But I'm sure you would

have been a success anyhow.

Your brother,

Percy

She looked up at her brother Bill, then to Charlie.

"What is it?" her mother asked. All her brothers exchanged glances, while everyone else looked concerned at the sudden change in atmosphere.



“Percy. He went in with them on my present.” Despite the fact that her beef with him wasn’t exactly on her own behalf, she felt touched by the gesture from Percy and by the effort on the part of her other brothers to reach out to him. This part of the gift wasn’t just for her; it was for the whole family.

Ron looked grumpy, as though he hadn’t quite reconciled himself with Percy’s action yet, and the twins were oddly expressionless. Ginny concluded that it had been her two oldest brothers who led the effort at fraternal collaboration, but in such a collective gesture, the impact was still the same. It was from her brothers. Not her-brothers-minus-Percy. Mrs. Weasley was crying. Mr. Weasley appeared to be reluctantly pleased as he comforted his wife.

“Believe it or not, Ginny, the present is inside that shiny paper,” Fred said. “You have to open it first.”

The tension in the air immediately drained away as several people chuckled at Fred’s characteristic bluntness.

Ginny tore into the wrapping paper excitedly. What she found was a large wooden box with a lock.

“Aw. Just what I always wanted,” she said, looking at Charlie. “A locked wooden crate. How’d you know?”

“Okay, smart ass,” Charlie said, tossing her a set of keys.

“Oh, you’re going to regret being so ungrateful in a minute,” Fred said, looking very, very smug.

She unlocked the box, opened the lid, and gaped.

“AHHHHHH!” she yelled in happy disbelief, jumping up out of her seat. She looked at the gift again and then her brothers. “AHHHHHHH!!”

She reached in and snatched her present out of the package, not noticing anyone else in the room.

“AHHHHH!” The sound just kept going until it morphed into a happy humming sound in the back of her throat that she couldn’t stop.

It was a broom. A broom. But not just any broom. It was a Cleansweep Retro, 1953 Gwendolyn Morgan Special Edition Chaser’s broom.

Still making that strange noise, she hugged the broom to her chest and jumped up and down happily. Angelina, Alicia, and Harry were all smiling at her reaction. They knew about brooms. They knew about awesome brooms and awesome brothers and awesome presents. They knew that this gift really, truly was perfect.

“She seems to like it,” Bill said.

“Too bad all she wanted was the crate,” Fred said.

“We’ll have to see if we can return the broom but keep its shipping materials,” George said.

Hearing her brothers speak, she turned to them, the happy humming stopped. “You all bought this for me?”

The happy glow on their faces were more of an answer than any words would have been. She was suddenly near tears. Her brothers--her stupid brothers who so loved to pick on her and hated to see her win games of hide-and-seek--had banded together to buy her this ridiculously extravagant gift. A gift they probably couldn’t afford. Because they wanted her to have the perfect birthday. It nearly overwhelmed her heart with happiness.

“I knew you’d love it,” Ron said, shooting Hermione a look of triumph.

“Of course I do!” Ginny said, still happily hugging the broom as her watery eyes scanned her brothers’ faces. She gently, gently put the broom down and launched herself at her brothers. She wanted to hug them all as a big group, but there were too many. She settled for hugging two at a time as tightly as she could. She held on for a long time, trying to convey what words could not: that this present meant

more to her than just a fast broom. It was the Weasley loyalty shining through, reaching out to her. And all she could do was hug them.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you! I love you all so much,” she said, head buried between Fred and Bill's shoulders. The wandless magic was starting to building up within her, but this was different than the angry destructive feeling she'd experienced before. She felt like she could have cast a Cheering Charm over all of them in this state. Or transfigured an elephant.

“And they say you can't buy love,” Charlie said sardonically as he held her. He was the single brother she hugged by himself, and for an extra long time. It had so clearly been his idea; the brother that had once taken the time and the patience to teach her how to fly, had somehow convinced his other brothers that their little sister was worth the newest and fastest Chaser's broomstick in the world. He'd even gone to Percy to make sure it was a gift from all her brothers. All of them.

“Thank you, Charlie,” she said, not wanting to let go. “This was brilliant.”

“Couldn't have you taking three hours to catch the Snitch again, could I? You were making the family look bad,” he said, brushing aside her enthusiasm.

“Who is this Morgan person?” Mrs. Weasley asked, leaning over the broom to have a closer look at just what her daughter was so excited about.

“Mum,” Ron whined. “She was Chaser and captain for the Holyhead Harpies in the greatest match they ever played! 1953, against the Heidelberg Harriers,” he rattled off the stats. “The match took seven bloody days!”

“And,” George added before their mother could scold Ron for his language, “when it was over, the captain for the Harriers, this bloke named Brand, he dismounted from his broom, got down on one knee, and proposed to Morgan. And she answered him with a broom to the face! Gave the bloke a concussion.”

"Which seemed like a very Ginny-like thing to do," Fred said.

"Never!" Ginny said, picking up her broom and hugging it again. "I would never, never hit someone with this broom."

They laughed.

"Your priorities are just right," Angelina said with a smile.

"Let's go try it out!" Ron said, standing.

"Can we? Do you have a Quidditch pitch here?" Alicia asked, looking around.

"Yeah," Harry said, a little embarrassed. "The house is a bit large."

"I have cake and ice cream," Mrs. Weasley protested, watching the children begin to move.

Ginny walked up and hugged her mother, saying, "I love you, Mum."

"I think that's her way of telling you she doesn't care about the cake and ice cream as much as the boys' present," Mr. Weasley said kindly.

"And yours!" Ginny said quickly, pointing to the dress robes. "Those are some spectacular dress robes. And I will wear them to the party that's thrown when I win my first Quidditch world cup on this broom."

The group migrated out to the Quidditch pitch all together, and they flew as family. Mr. Weasley even joined in as a keeper for the team opposite Ron, though he laughed so hard that he didn't catch half as many Quaffles as he should have. And all the while, Ginny twirled and dove and darted between her brothers and Harry and the girls on her retro, more graceful than she ever was on the ground. Better situated.

She flew like a bird, and thought for one perfect moment as she raced up into the sky on the broom her brothers bought her, that she had never been happier in her life.

## CHAPTER 3

### Bumbling Toward Friendship

It wasn't until Ginny woke up the day after her birthday, sore from all the flying, that she thought about Dumbledore's present tucked snugly in her robes. Rolling half out of bed with her lower body still on the mattress, she put a hand on the ground and stretched out to snag the dirty robe she'd tossed on the ground the day before.

A bit of wandless magic quickly undid the Shrinking Charm that Dumbledore had put on the heavy little box, and Ginny was soon sitting up in bed opening her last birthday present. The card on top was in Dumbledore's signature fine script.

Miss Weasley,

I hope you have enjoyed your birthday. I thought that you might find the enclosed useful in the upcoming school year. Take care. This letter will dispose of itself in one minute and three seconds.

Albus Dumbledore

Ginny quickly re-read the note and put it down on the table. She wasn't sure what Dumbledore meant by "dispose of itself," but she thought it best not to hold it when that happened. She had just plucked the bow off the top of the present when she heard a snap! followed by a crackling sound. She looked over at the note to find it burning itself up.

Well, that certainly constituted disposing itself.

She went back to the large object in front of her and continued to unwrap it. Inside was a wooden chest, which was, at first glance, not unlike the case her broom had come in. Maybe people really thought she needed to package her things better. However, it was more of a cube, taller and not nearly as long, and the keys were hanging from the lock. She unlocked it and opened the lid to find another note.

This box might prove useful for storing things you do not want people to find. There is an emblem just under the lock on the front, which causes the box to shrink. The emblem is keyed to your touch.

Ginny looked quickly for the emblem and found it, just where the note said it would be. It was the Gryffindor lion, encased in a circle, and about the size of a Sickle. She heard the crackling noise again, and found the second note quickly disappearing into flame. If she weren't careful, she could accidentally light the pretty comforter on fire. She turned her attention to the contents of the box.

They were books. A large pile of books. Ginny picked one up and read the title: Rare and Dangerous Potions of the Middle Ages. The cover was black and shiny, with a cauldron boiling in the background emitting soft fog that leaked out of the cover and onto her hand.

Awesome.

She put it back and went to sift through the rest of the books.

Apparation: How to Move Around Without Leaving Any Bits of Yourself Behind

Recognizing Liquids That Will Kill You & Preparing Antidotes to Thwart Them

Defending Against Things Your Parents Don't Want You to Know Exist

The Auror's First Aid Manual

Meditation and Self Control for the Witch on the Go

The Best of the Light: The Official Auror Training Text (Year One)

The Best of the Light: The Official Auror Training Text (Year Two)

The Best of the Light: The Official Auror Training Text (Year Three)

Transfiguration Prodigy

Okay. Ginny could acknowledge that she was good in these classes. In fact, she was top of her year. But these books were beyond anything she could have hoped for. In fact, she'd been looking at prices of texts in mail order catalogues for the last few months trying to decide which books she could buy to help advance her studies. It was like the headmaster had answered a wish she'd never spoken.

But what was he thinking giving her Auror texts? Ginny didn't want to be an Auror. She'd rather work as a cashier in a bookstore before she jumped into that career.

She flipped through the pages of the Year One text, which was older and had clearly been studied a lot. The pages were dog-eared and there were notes in the margins. Ginny actually preferred used books for the little notations she often found in them. Students who jotted down notes in their texts made it easier for Ginny to follow what was happening in class even when her mind drifted in lessons to other, more interesting subjects.

But the writing on the title page made Ginny stop flipping. Her eyes went wide.

GIDEON PREWETT

The name was written in clear, slanted capital letters in the corner of the page.

My uncle? She knew that her mother's two brothers had been Aurors in the last war. Death Eaters had killed them in the end. But why did Dumbledore have this book? And why was he giving it to her?

I mean, I'm clearly going to use it, she thought, but it was Ron who wanted to be an Auror. Ron who was desperate to be one, actually. Why not give the books to him?

Well, whatever the reason, she liked having books that her uncle had used; all three books had the same precisely written name in the top right corner of the title page. Gideon apparently was a fastidious note-taker, and the pages were filled with minute writing. Perfect.



She wondered for a moment if her mother knew about her brother's old books, but quickly discarded that idea when she remembered that her mother would go spare if she knew the headmaster had given her only daughter a set of Auror training manuals.

The books on Apparation, Meditation, and Antidotes were brand new; they creaked when she bent back the covers. She'd have fun with the former, learning how to squeeze herself across space. Like the Shield spell, Ginny thought Apparition might be something she could do effectively wandlessly, but she'd have to wait and see. Meditation was probably a not-so-subtle hint from Dumbledore that he would prefer for her not to blow things up in the castle accidentally. Made sense.

Still, it was the Potions' texts that kept drawing her attention. They both looked mildly unpleasant, as if to ward off people who just dabbled, and from the glimpses she saw about Potion theory in the antidote book, it was cleverly done. That would be a great help. Like most students, Ginny's favorite classes were the ones she found easy, and Potions was the easiest of all, so reading about it was a breeze. She liked that you could see what went into each concoction, and how the effects and attributes would change depending on what you added, how you prepared the ingredients, the temperature at which you combined them.

The last book in the pile was the Transfiguration one, and it was the one she was most curious about. Potions and Defence came naturally to Ginny, and she loved them for it. But Transfiguration wasn't something she particularly enjoyed. She went to class, listened to the professor, and received excellent marks, but something about it was dissatisfying. Unpleasant.

So it didn't feel as natural to receive an old, used book that claimed it was meant for Transfiguration prodigies. No matter how good she was, Ginny knew she wasn't a prodigy at this particular subject. Plus, and this had been the most shocking thing, Transfiguration Prodigy was written by McGonagall herself.

Maybe it was her uncle's too, she thought, and that's why they'd give it to her. She flipped open the cover to look for the name of its former owner.

James Potter

Gryffindor, 1976

Ginny's mouth fell open.

Well, that was an absolute joke. What was she doing with the book that should have gone to Harry?

She decided to figure this out.

Harry was with Dumbledore somewhere away from the house. He was still looking tired and preoccupied, keeping his distance from his friends. It wasn't like last year, though. There was no simmering anger, but rather an overwhelming resolve on his shoulders that Ginny wasn't fond of (though it was rather attractive).

Thinking about these things, Ginny made her way to Remus's room and knocked.

"Come in," he called, and she did. He was sitting at a small desk facing a window. The sky was overcast and grey, Ginny's least favorite kind of day, despite everyone joking that with her skin, this ought to be her prime.

"Morning, Remus," she said. He said hello back and they exchanged pleasantries.

"What can I do for you?" Remus asked, standing.

"I wanted to know," Ginny said, holding the book out to him, "what you thought about Dumbledore giving me this book."

Remus took it in his long fingers and opened to the page marked with his dead best friend's name, pausing long enough for Ginny to know

that it really struck a cord with him. It wasn't until his eyes went out of focus that Ginny realized that this wasn't the best thought out plan.

"Sirius told me that James Potter was good at Transfiguration," Ginny said, trying to start a conversation before memories overwhelmed the werewolf.

Remus shook his head. "Sirius didn't know what he was talking about."

"So James Potter wasn't that good?" Ginny asked.

"He was the best," Remus said, shaking his head in fond remembrance. "Brilliant beyond comprehension, and Sirius never really understood James's gift because he was so good at it himself. For Sirius, Transfiguration was like a game he was very, very good at. For James, it was like breathing."

"A prodigy?" Ginny asked, jerking her chin toward the book.

Remus nodded, hand on the front and back covers. "And if Dumbledore thought you deserved this book, then he saw something special in you, too."

"It's weird having a book that belongs to Harry."

"I think Harry has enough to deal with without everyone expecting him to live up to the image of James and Lily Potter," Remus said, handing the book back. "Keep the book. It'll help you. It certainly helped James."

"With becoming an illegal animagus?" she asked, opening the pages.

"No," Remus said, smiling, "with learning how to make new things, how to conjure an old fashioned desk so that it would never revert, how to heal a shattered bone. He and Sirius once took turns breaking their arms to practice healing them. Dumbest thing I'd ever heard of at the time, but the skill ended up helping a lot of people."

Ginny held the book with her thin, small hands. "Maybe I'll have to find a crazy best friend to practice with myself."

"Or a group of friends who practice increasingly dangerous Defensive magic," Remus said lightly, glancing at the book.

"Or that," Ginny agreed. They talked for a few more minutes, but then Ginny went back up to her room to read her books on the open-air patio. The first book she read was Transfiguration Prodigy.

It was late afternoon when Ginny suddenly thought to write a thank you note to Percy for the birthday gift.

Dear Percy,

I wanted to write to thank you for the broom. It was a brilliant present, better than I ever would have imagined a birthday present could be. I know that you are not as Quidditch-obsessed as the rest of them, but that just makes it a more thoughtful gift on your part. Mum and Dad were very happy to see your name on the wrapping. It meant a lot to me, too.

But it would have meant more with you there.

I do hope you're well, wherever you are, but you were wrong to leave. Wrong about the war. Just admit it. Stop being so stubborn and just talk to us. Hiding is just making all of us angrier. Mum wants you home, and to be honest, I don't know why you haven't tried to come back yet. I suppose it might be shame. Seems like a pretty awful reason to abandon your family.

We're waiting for you and your apology.

Just think about that, and consider it. You should stop acting like a prat. Soon.

Love,

Ginny

It wasn't perfect. What she really wanted to write was a rant, but she had already done that. And Percy had never reacted well to things like that. Maybe then he'd come around the Burrow for a meal or two. Maybe. Hopefully. She was tired of feeling like her family was broken.

She suspected that, to Harry, Percy was simply another wizard who made his life harder than it had to be. The fact that Percy was a Weasley would probably end up being the difference between toleration and enemy status where Harry was concerned.

But he was still her brother. Always would be. Even if he didn't listen to her letter and stayed away. It was a like a rift in the family, and she wanted it healed, despite her annoyance.

While Ginny's new books were very, very interesting, and while she did need to study, the Retro still took up the majority of her waking hours.

How could one person own such an amazing broom, live in a house with a Quidditch pitch, and not fly all day?

But Charlie had left the day before, and the twins had gone back to work, so Ginny didn't really have anyone to play with except Ron, and he had Hermione and Harry around to—

Harry.

Ginny sat upright in the chair where she'd been finishing the fifth year Transfiguration book that Ron had dumped on her (along with the rest of his fifth year books) on the last day of class last term. Harry would play with her.

She made it to his room in record time, knocking briefly before opening it to find him lying on his back on the bed, feet on the ground. He jumped up, wand drawn before she spoke, which she ignored.

"Want to play Quidditch?" she asked, eyes bright.

His tense stance melted away, but he hesitated. "I can't. I have to—"

"No excuses," she said, shaking her head. He still looked resistant, so she begged. "Please? You know you want to. Big sky. Little broom. Better flier." She pointed to herself after the last one, and was grateful to see the spark of competitiveness in his eye. Five years on the Quidditch team could make anyone competitive.

But still he said, "I can't. I have things I have to do."

On his desk, Ginny spotted a drawing of a ring that looked vaguely familiar, and said, "You've been holed up in here for forever. Live a little."

"I was out all day on your birthday."

"That was half a week ago," she said, waving her hand dismissively.

"Ron will play with you."

"Probably, and you should play with us too," Ginny needled.

Harry tried to hide his smile. "You're not going to stop asking, are you?"

"Not until you agree," Ginny said, shaking her head. "I'm a little sister who's used to getting her way."

He laughed, but nodded at the parchment on his desk. "I still can't go until I finish this."

"Or you could go right now," she said, stepping into his line of vision, "and finish it later."

He looked skeptical.

"Please?" she asked, putting her hands together. "You're my only real competition, and I'm tired of reading. Then I'll let you go back to being dull again."

So he finally relented, and Ginny practically skipped to the Quidditch pitch on the edge of the line of trees. And the two flew for hours,

Harry's body gradually relaxing. Ginny hadn't realized how tense he was until she saw him on a broom, where he was most comfortable and free.

"Even on your Retro," Harry said, corkscrewing under her, "you're still no match for the Firebolt."

"I could beat you on a Cleansweep," she said, tossing back her head. "Or have you forgotten that I replaced you on the team?"

He laughed, pulled a backward turn to face her again. "Only because I received a lifetime ban."

"Details," Ginny said, waving that off. "I still played your position and won you some games."

"Let's race," he said, and they did. They went through a dozen training exercises from practices, and neither wanted to land and face the real world again, the world of studying and secret missions and burdens.

It was true that the Retro was the best broom on the market, but the limited edition Firebolt was probably one of the finest brooms ever made, and Harry made flying look effortless as always. She was glad to be fast and agile, able to keep up with him. And occasionally, she surprised him, too, which was nice.

"What was that move?" Harry asked.

"Ginny Weasley's One-Handed Backspin," she said with a grin. She was sweaty and tired, and gloriously happy.

"I'll have to learn that one sometime," he said, looking amused.

"Maybe next time I'm in desperate need of a study break," Ginny said, landing at last.

Harry nodded, landing too. It was as if merely touching the ground made him off balance, and he looked around as if confused about where he was.

“Still working on your essays?” Harry asked, walking slowly over to the brick broom shed, which really wasn’t a shed at all, more like a nice little house.

“I’m mostly done with those. Now I’m preparing for next year.”

“I never knew you were so studious,” he said opening the wood door.

“Nor I you,” she said, walking through. He followed. “You’ve been camped out at your desk nearly since you arrived. Had to be forced to go flying. Isn’t natural.”

He put his broom neatly in the hangar on the wall. “There are things I have to do.”

“Sure,” she agreed, lovingly locking her broom back in the big crate. “But those things don’t involve driving yourself insane, right? Take a break. Eat. Play. Talk to Ron and Hermione.”

“Not you?” he asked, side-stepping the question.

“Go flying with me,” she said. “You’re my only competition with Charlie gone.”

He grinned. “We’ll see.”

It was moments like this when he looked almost normal again, as close to an average sixteen as Harry Potter could ever look. His eyes were lighter, and the smile made his whole face look younger. But the seriousness in his eyes and the burden he could never shake stayed with him still.

Without thinking, Ginny steered them to the door leading into the kitchen, where she chugged two glasses of water before picking up a banana. Harry stuck with water, so she tossed the unpeeled banana at him. Seeker reflexes kicked in and he caught it. She picked up another for herself. Dobby and Winky were good at keeping healthy food in the house.



“Strawberries are my favorite fruit, but bananas are a close second,” she said, resting on a chair at the smaller wooden breakfast table. “You ever had a banana spilt?”

Harry shook his head.

“They are a Muggle dessert, and they are very nearly perfect,” Ginny said.

“You’ll have to show me sometime,” Harry said, breaking off a piece of the banana and munching on it. Ginny nearly grinned.

But soon the exercise and snack time was over, and Harry was trudging back up to his room and the dreary black and white drawing and stacks of notes that had been on his desk. Not a normal vacation activity. Not a normal bloke at all.

“Oh, good, you’re here,” Mrs. Weasley said, bustling into the room. “Can you tell the others that lunch is ready and your Hogwarts letters have arrived?”

The moment Ginny yelled that the Hogwarts letters were there, two sets of pounding footsteps could be heard all the way in the kitchen. Ron and Hermione nearly pushed each other out of the way, only for her to stand politely in front of Mrs. Weasley expectantly while Ron snatched his letter out of his mother’s hand. Harry arrived soon afterward and took his place beside them at the counter.

Those were O.W.L. scores. A sharp feeling of pain and annoyance shot through her. She wouldn’t receive such a letter until the following summer instead of mid-year, as she had hoped. Stupid regulations, it made Ginny’s thin letter seem lackluster, and she didn’t bother opening it, tossing it on the counter and eating a sandwich instead.

The food in front of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, was mostly not touched as they all tore open their envelopes.

Two badges fell from Hermione and Ron’s letters.

“Oh!” Hermione exclaimed, looking over quickly at Harry, who smiled. Ron looked really proud, only to turn back to the parchment almost immediately.

Not wanting to witness this any longer, Ginny pushed aside her simmering resentment and broke the seal on her own envelope. Yep, exactly as she had thought: the list of books and things for the new term. She’d known she probably wouldn’t be her year’s prefect, and wondered who it could possibly be. Probably Kerney, Ginny thought. Her good friend was efficient and fair, to say the least. Then Ginny smiled.

“What’s so amusing?” Harry asked, catching her expression change.

“I was imagining Luna as the Ravenclaw prefect,” she said. “It would be so awesome.”

Harry grinned.

“How’d you do?” she asked, nodding at the results he held but had not read. Ron was still absorbing his, and Hermione’s face was hidden behind her parchment, which was a bit longer than expected.

He put the envelope down, and they both heard what sounded like a badge inside. Harry quickly scooped a hand in and pulled out the shiny Quidditch captain badge.

“Brilliant,” she said, grinning.

“What is? What’s brilliant?” Ron asked, nosey as always.

“Quidditch Captain Potter,” Ginny said, pointing to Harry, who was smiling broadly. It never failed to amaze Ginny that out of everything that Harry was good at, Quidditch was the only thing that he really believed he could do well.

“Your ban was lifted!” Ron exclaimed, momentarily forgetting the O.W.L. scores he’d been so excited about a few minutes earlier. “Brilliant. Now we have a real shot at winning!”

They had done just fine the year before, but Ginny agreed that Harry really was the best player she'd ever seen outside the professionals.

"Harry, that's great," Hermione said. Despite not really caring about the game itself, Hermione cared a great deal for her two friends and her house, and knew it meant a lot to them.

"I'll have to schedule tryouts and plan our new strategies," Harry said, grinning as if welcoming the extra work. "I thought Katie would get it for sure. She's older."

"But not more experienced," Ron said. "She started the same year as you."

Natural leader that he was, Harry would flourish as Quidditch captain and they all knew it.

"I wonder if that means all of Umbridge's Decrees are done," Ron said.

"Of course they are, Ron," Hermione said. "They announced that in June."

Ron rolled his eyes as if to say he didn't care, and was soon riffling through his parchment for his scores. Hermione went back to hers, and the whole room fell quiet. Even Mrs. Weasley in the corner.

"Six!" cried Ron, pumping his fist in the air. "E in Defence and Transfiguration. A in Potions, Care of Magical Creature, Charms, and History. P in Divination and D in Astronomy, but that's not too bad."

"Ron, that's great!" Ginny said, hugging her brother.

"That's wonderful, dear!" Mrs. Weasley agreed, embracing her son, who was too pleased with himself to shove her off out of embarrassment.

"Mean bugger, getting as many as you and I combined," Fred groused to George.

“Had to show us up,” George agreed, shaking his head. “Disloyal, that’s what that is.”

“Oh, you two!” Mrs. Weasley said, swatting them with her dishrag.

While Fred and George defended their O.W.L. results against those of their younger brother, Ron snatched Harry’s parchment out of his hand.

“Wow, mate, these are great!” Ron said.

“You’re so nosey,” Ginny said, clipping him on the shoulder.

“O in Defence, E in Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, and Care of Magical Creatures. A in Astronomy and Herbology. And P in History and Divination,” Ron recited, shaking his head. “Better than me.”

“You have an O in Defence?” Hermione asked, leaning around Ron to see.

Harry smiled. “Despite Umbridge, yeah.”

Hermione’s face fell, and Ron took her by surprise when he snatched her letter from her hands. Ginny was about to yell at him again when his eyes went wide.

“Cor, you really are a genius, aren’t you?” he asked, making her blush.

Harry peeked around Ron to see the results. “All Os!”

“Not in Defence,” Hermione said, trying and failing not to look so very disappointed.

Ron laughed. “You made better marks than Bill. Why are you so upset about one lousy E?”

She did reply.

Ron scanned the paper and paused. "And what's this? How did you take these O.W.L.s? You weren't in these classes."

"You can sit any exam you want," Hermione said primly.

"You made twelve O.W.L.s and didn't even take some of the classes that were required? Are you insane?" Ron asked, but Ginny just kicked the counter in rhythm, once again trying not to be overwhelmed by how unfair the world was. Hermione took O.W.L.s she technically shouldn't have been able to do. Ginny just wanted to do the same a bit early. Sure, they were slightly different requests, but—

No. Ginny pushed these thoughts out of her mind. It was done. She would accept that, and succeed in other places. Make them regret holding her back.

Lunch went on with an extra, celebratory pudding quickly whipped up by Dobby and Winky, to mark the occasion of Harry's Quidditch news and Ron and Hermione's re-selection as Gryffindor Prefects. This celebration was briefly interrupted by Mrs. Weasley's blunt inquiry after Ginny's own Prefect status.

"I love my brothers too much to betray them like that," Ginny said, slapping a hand on George's back. He and Fred both sat up proudly.

"That's why she's our favorite," George said, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

"Unlike some overachievers we know," Fred said, shooting a look at Ron, who just scowled. Harry laughed.

Later, as the adults drank tea or nursed something a bit more potent, Ginny noticed Harry slip out of the kitchen, presumably to head back to his room. Ginny looked around to make sure no one was paying attention, and followed after him. She caught up to him as he was rounding the stairs to go up, and grabbed his arm.

"Harry."

“Oh, hey Ginny.” He looked startled.

“I had a thought,” she said.

“Oh?”

“Yes, and it was a very good one, and it was about you so try to look a little more excited,” she said. He tried. And failed, making her smile. “Ron mentioned that you wanted to join the Aurors and needed N.E.W.T. Potions for it, right?”

He looked skeptical, but nodded. “I needed an O, and I only made an E.”

“Sure,” Ginny said, “but Hermione sat for exams that she didn’t take.”

“So? You think I should take the O.W.L. again?”

“No, I think you should study Potions on your own and take the N.E.W.T. your seventh year anyway,” she said.

That seemed to make Harry think. As he tried to come up with a reason why it wasn’t possible, Ginny went on.

“And you are lucky to have me as a friend because in addition to being a great flier, I am excellent at Potions and have a study group that meets all the time during the school year,” she said with a smile.

“But you’d still be a year behind,” he said.

Yes. Despite her attempt to take the O.W.L.s early, that was true; yet Ginny said, “We’re working on sixth year material right now. And the girl I study with is brilliant. A bit stand-offish, but brilliant.”

“Do I know her?”

“I don’t know. Do you know Devon Pierce?” Ginny asked, guessing the answer even as he shook his head. “That’s all right, you’ll know her soon enough. She’s very indifferent.”

He looked confused by her description. "I don't know."

"Think about it," Ginny said. "Studying is much, much easier with other people. Which is why I'm driving myself spare doing it alone right now."

Harry smiled.

"We could make it a deal," Ginny said, thinking on her feet. "You study with me during lunch sometimes, and we'll go flying in the morning. I'm really good company, after all, and I haven't gotten sick of you yet."

He laughed. "Well, that's good."

"It is," she said, trying not to look at the picture behind Harry where four different people in a boat were nodding encouragingly at her.

"We could study on our patio," Harry said.

"Perfect. Best view in the house. Lunch tomorrow first."

She had an alternate reason for the scheduled time. Harry looked like he could eat more, and despite how much she hated sounding like her mother, Ginny knew that it would do him good to be forced to eat with someone else once in a while.

Their arrangement became a ritual. Harry and Ginny up ridiculously early in the morning flying as the sun rose, and sitting on the patio with lemonade and biscuits looking over the various methods to identify ingredients and their effects on a potion.

"I've never been able to sleep much," Harry admitted one afternoon a week later. "Comes from years of making breakfast, I guess."

"You cook?"

"I try not to burn bacon," Harry corrected. "It's very different. My aunt never trusted me with the difficult tasks."

“My mum’s been trying to force them on me for a decade,” Ginny said, flipping the page of her book. “I don’t know when she’ll catch on that I plan to marry wealthy and have a house elf.”

Harry smiled. “I’m sure Dobby would go with you.”

“Dobby and Winky have claimed you as their master,” Ginny said, making a note in the margins, “and I don’t think there’s any way I could pry them out of this house.”

About two weeks after the start of their arrangement, Harry failed to show up in the morning. Ginny had wondered about it, but had found her dad sitting at the kitchen table on her way to the Quidditch pitch.

“Hey,” she said, giving him a hug. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever.”

He looked tired. “Not since your birthday. I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. It’s probably really busy at work right now,” Ginny said, settling into the chair next to him.

He nodded. “And the new Minister is making all of the mistakes that Crouch made twenty years ago, as if he didn’t know better.”

In theory, Ginny knew that the war was growing, but she had so little contact with the outside world while isolated at Spinner’s End and Hogwarts that it sometimes felt distant.

“I wish we could be at the Burrow,” Mr. Weasley sighed, and Ginny wanted so much to comfort her father.

“This place isn’t so bad,” Ginny said. “It’s not home, but it’s nice.”

Her father gave a wry smile. “I think Ron likes it better than home, actually.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Ginny said. “The Burrow is special.”



“That’s nice of you to say, Ginny Baninny,” Mr. Weasley said, for the first time noticing her outfit. “Were you going to go flying?”

She nodded. “That was the plan.”

“I’d like to join you,” he said, standing. “If you don’t mind.”

Ginny grinned. “Of course not, Dad. That’d be great. Let’s go.”

Her dad had been a good flier in school. Not the best, and not on his Quidditch team, but solid nonetheless, and flying with him was fun. They talked and caught up. In a family with seven kids, alone time with Dad was coveted. So Ginny didn’t really mind that Harry had ditched her that morning.

But she was still happy to find him on the patio at lunch, already eating a biscuit. He’d begun to show the effects of eating more.

“Sorry about this morning,” Harry said, standing.

“It’s all right.”

“I stayed up late talking to Ron and Hermione,” he said, and suddenly Ginny realized why he sounded and looked so different: it was as if a weight had been lifted of his shoulders. As if he were excited and happy and alive again, as Ginny hadn’t seen him since last year during the D.A. practice sessions.

“That’s all right, I went flying with my dad,” she said, smiling at the change in his demeanor.

“He was a good Keeper on your birthday,” Harry said, and she nodded.

“He still has the moves.”

Harry glanced at the horizon, still jovial.

“I have to admit that I snooped a bit when I was bored here alone.” Harry glanced over at her stack of books, and she froze. “Those

aren't exactly fifth year books. Apparition. Rare and dangerous potions. Auror training books."

"Professor Dumbledore gave them to me for my birthday."

Harry's face gave the impression that he had been wondering about this for a while and that his suspicions had been answered.

"He gave me some, too. For my birthday, I mean." He picked up the Auror training book. "Like I have three of these. One for each year."

"They're really well written," Ginny said. "Easy reads, even if I haven't been able to try some of the exercises."

"I haven't read them."

"Lazy," she said with a smile.

"Maybe I'm just not as ambitious as you," Harry said.

"Or maybe you're busy with secret projects. The reason doesn't matter, what does matter is that you and I can talk about this now if you just start reading," Ginny said, looking pointedly at him.

"This was supposed to be a Potions session."

"We're branching out," she said.

"Only if you tell me why you think he gave you these books," Harry said, leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

"You mean just because I'm not the Boy-Who-Lived, the Headmaster can't give me advanced Defence books?" she asked.

"It may be your O.W.L. year and you may have been at the Department of Mysteries, but that doesn't explain Rare and Dangerous Potions of the Middle Ages," Harry said, nodding at the volume.

"I told you I was really good at Potions," she reminded him. "And I meant it."

"Still," Harry said, "Rare and Dangerous?"

"I'm going to be doing a special independent study in Potions this year," she said at last, "along with Transfiguration and Defence."

"A special independent study?" he repeated. "What does that mean?"

Ginny took a moment to appreciate the fact that he seemed bolder and more blunt than just a day ago. Talking to his best mates seemed to have been good for him.

"I don't know yet," she admitted. "It was a consolation prize for not being allowed to take those O.W.L.s early like I had asked to do."

His eyebrows rose. "Lavender Brown nearly had a mental breakdown taking them on time, you know."

"I'm not Lavender Brown," she said, tapping her nail on the hard cover of the fogging book. "But Professors Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall, and the new Defence one didn't seem to realize that. So I'll wait until the end of the year like everyone else, useless."

"Is that why you wanted to take them early?" Harry asked. "Not to be useless?"

The question everyone asked—why?—and this time she wanted to be as honest as possible with Harry without making herself seem creepy.

"I wanted to take them partly because I knew I could do well. Partly because I wanted the challenge. But mostly, yes, because I was practically useless in the Department of Mysteries lying on the floor, unconscious with a shattered ankle," she said, and his eyes grew darker. "I'm still going to study non-verbal spell casting and advanced Healing. I also want to learn about countering spells without recognizing them, but those are all N.E.W.T. lessons, and as much

as I didn't want to wait around a year in class, Ministry and Hogwarts regulations seem determined to think me incompetent."

Harry looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. Bright and hot, the day was beautiful around them, but neither noticed as their eyes locked. This was what it felt like to have the full force of Harry Potter's gaze upon you, she thought, completely immobile.

"You don't have to be advanced in school to be useful," Harry said, clearly struggling with how to say this properly. "I mean, Hermione's brilliant. Smartest witch I know, but we were just at the end of first year when we first met Voldemort. Clever as she was, we were young. It's like I said in the Hogshead. It's mostly luck."

"I know that." Ginny remembered him knocking over the tall shelves of prophecies that confused and blocked their attackers in the Department of Mysteries, remembered the exact moment when his eyes lit up with an idea of how to escape. And she'd had absolutely no idea what he was planning until a moment before. "But I could be great, you know. I could pass these exams."

He watched her with his green eyes—so similar to new growth in evergreens in the spring—and nodded. "I've seen you in Defence."

The cold cover of the Potions book pressed against her palm. "Thanks, Harry."

He shrugged and, after considering her for a couple of moments more, shook his head and focused on the table in front of him where his book still lay open. As he looked down, Ginny was struck by how much he didn't look like a kid anymore. He wasn't just taller, like Ron; he looked older. She wondered briefly if he looked like his dad when he did that, and that brought to mind the hand-me-down books she had received from the headmaster.

"Harry," she said quietly, before she could stop herself.

"Hm?"

“Your Auror books—did they belong to your dad?” She didn’t have a clue whether James Potter had been an Auror, but she was operating on a hunch.

He looked surprised. “Yeah, they did.” His brow furrowed. “How’d you know that?”

“Well,” she said, exchanging the Potions book for the first of the Auror ones, “mine belonged to my uncle Gideon Prewett.”

Harry took the offered book, and opened it. “Gideon Prewett?”

She nodded, twisting her head to see the signature with Harry on the overcast summer day. “He and his brother were killed by Voldemort.”

“I know. Moody said it took half a dozen Death Eaters to take them down, and that they managed to take four down with them,” Harry said, looking up at her.

“Moody loves telling that story,” Ginny said, resting her elbow on the table. “But they all just make my mum cry. Everyone always talked about them like they were distant strangers, she says, and she always thinks of them as her little brothers who lit the Christmas tree on fire one year.”

“I wish—” Harry cut himself off, and Ginny was almost positive he’d been about to say he wished he had a private memory of his parents to remember them by, but he refrained. “Moody showed me a picture of the Order last summer. He told me all their names, and how they died.”

“My uncles were in the picture?” she asked. She couldn’t remember a photo of them besides the young ones from her mum’s school days, and she’d enjoyed looking at her young-looking mum more than the uncles she’d never met.

He nodded. “That’s when Moody told me they fought like heroes.”

“Mum certainly thought the world of them.” She added as an afterthought, “But it sure would have been nice to meet them.”

"I know what you mean," Harry agreed.

They sat there for a while, Harry staring over the trees, Ginny staring, unseeing, at the book in her lap. They were caught up in thoughts of family and Voldemort and the people they had lost, until Ginny shook herself free.

"Actually, Harry, there's another book he gave me that you might like," Ginny said, walking over to the stack and pulling out Transfiguration Prodigy. She held it out to him. "It was your dad's."

"What?" Harry asked, taking it and riffling through to see all of James Potter's commentary in the margins. There were even a few notes in another, very precise handwriting that he might recognize as Sirius's that mainly said 'useless' or 'remember.'

"His name's on the first page," she said, and he went to look. "Your dad's."

"Can I—have you read this?" Harry asked.

Ginny nodded. "It was the first one I finished. You can have it, but I'd like to borrow it for practice."

"I just—I don't have anything of his except the invisibility cloak and Marauder's Map," Harry said. Tokens of the lives stolen by Tom Riddle. Physical ones instead of the middle names that Ginny's brothers bore.

"It's not a problem. Great book, too." Ginny tapped the cover with her knuckle. "Dead useful."

"Ollivander told me my dad's wand was made for Transfiguration."

"Mr. Ollivander the wand maker?" Ginny had received hers second hand that first year, but her parents bought her a new one after her dad won that money before second year.

"Yep," he said, hand lightly touching the book. He decided to put it in his room for safekeeping, and Ginny took the momentary reprieve to try to imagine what it would feel like to have nothing of her parents but a few books and secondhand stories. She didn't much like the picture of the world that way.

"Have you reviewed all the material on Apparating yet?" she asked when he came back outside. Harry nodded. "Let's try that, then. Bill said he found a ward yesterday that blocked ministry detection of underage magic."

Harry's face lit up, their previous conversation evaporating into the lingering clouds. "Okay."

So they spent the rest of the afternoon staring very intently into the space three feet in front of them, turning just so, and not actually moving at all, no matter how hard they focused. It was the very hardest thing that Ginny had ever tried to do.

"Concentrate on a single space," Harry coached. Ginny tried and that didn't work either.

"Well, this has been fun," she said, leaning against the railing.

"It just takes a bit of work," Harry said in his 'teacher voice' that she wasn't sure he knew he used. "We'll get it."

They spent a week trying, in the midst of other things, and decided to take a break after figuring out how to move small distances until they could ask Remus about it. In the meantime, Harry was ever-more entrenched in his secret studies.

Harry had in fact made up with Ron and Hermione, and as a result he studied and flew with Ginny less often, but the general improvement to his attitude and the clear comfort he felt at the change made Ginny happy enough that she didn't really mind. The Trio slipped away to talk often, but at meals the difference was marked: Harry looked quite surprised and happy that his two best friends were beside him. It made Ginny's heart ache a little. How could he not know that how

much they all loved him? Even her mother, who heaped potatoes on his plate in a demonstration of affection.

Besides, the increase in Trio Time gave her the chance to spend time with Remus, her parents, and the other random brothers and guests who stopped by.

And Harry and Ginny still spent more time together than they had in the past years.

"This is brilliant," Ginny said a few weeks later, happily Apparating the short distance onto the patio from her room. Harry smiled, but a soft noise coming from the open door leading to his room caught both their attentions. She went to investigate, with Harry following behind her. What she found was not exactly surprising, but curious just the same.

It was the kitten who had been wrestling with her slipper the morning Harry had arrived at Spinner's End. The little beast had gotten stuck in a little hole in Harry's cabinet and was trying valiantly to squeeze through, making pathetic mewing noises the whole time. Upon noticing Harry and Ginny, it stopped its activity and looked at each one of them in turn, spending longer on Harry.

Appearing to come to some sort of decision, the kitten made one final push and popped out of the hole. Shaking itself briefly, it then trotted over to Harry, looking up and meowing quietly at him. Harry reached down, picked it up, and looked at Ginny with a very perplexed expression.

"Is this yours?" he asked her.

"I don't think so, although I've seen him before. I think he likes to come in here to play." Harry continued to study the cat and then remembered that he was the master of an estate with two very resourceful house elves.

"Dobby?" he called out, reluctantly. With a small pop the elf appeared.



“Yes, Harry Potter, sir?” Dobby turned and bowed to Ginny, who smiled at him and waved.

“Hi. Sorry to bother you, but do you know whose cat this is?”

Dobby beamed and nodded very quickly, glad to be able to help. “It is Harry Potter’s cat, sir.”

“Mine?”

“Yes, sir. They has always lived with the Potters, Harry Potter, sir. But they is special cats. Very special and very smart.”

“They?” Ginny asked.

“Oh, yes. This is only the baby, Miss Wheezy. There once was mother and father cats, too. They knew the grounds very well indeed, and knew when things was not right. They was very helpful, just like Dobby is helpful.” He beamed. Ginny forced herself not to chuckle.

While she was distracted looking at Dobby, she did not notice the kitten gear up on its haunches and leap across the space between her and Harry. Harry gave a yelp as the little grey fur ball sprang from the light hold he had on it and pounced on Ginny’s shoulder. Ginny gasped, but caught it thanks to practiced Quidditch reflexes. She looked at her new attachment; its eyes looked like they were dancing in merriment. Then it cocked its head to the side and studied her thoughtfully.

Ginny thought that, for a cat, it acted an awful lot like a person.

“Does it have a name?” she asked Dobby.

“No, Miss Wheezy. He does not have a name because Mr. Harry Potter has not named him.”

“What about his parents, did they have names?”

“Yes, because Mr. James and Miss Lily named them.”

At hearing his parents' names, Harry started. "My parents had cats?"

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir. They is connected to the family who owns them, like house elves, but there is one for each wizard. One for Mr. James, and one for Miss Lily, and now that you has come home, one for Mr. Harry Potter."

The Potters had had cats. Such a strange little detail, yet it made them seem more real to Ginny, and holding the kitten in her hands made it feel like there was a tangible connection.

Harry still looked dumbstruck by this new information, while Ginny was distracted when the kitten jumped away from her to the ground, where it wound around Harry's feet.

"So, what are you going to name him?" she asked.

"I don't know," Harry said, scooping it up. He turned to Dobby. "What were my parents' cats named?"

"Truth and Dare," Dobby said. How interesting.

"You could name yours Grey Area," Ginny joked with a smile. Dobby disappeared in a blink, and in his place a little saucer of milk appeared. "Or some sleepover game like Bloody Mary."

"What's that?" Harry asked.

Ginny shook her head. "Never mind."

Harry probably hadn't had many sleepovers before leaving the Muggle world.

"Hedwig's a pretty name," Ginny said, watching Harry gently set the kitten on the ground. It scooted over to lap up the milk. "How'd you pick that?"

"I read it in a book when I was eleven," Harry said, watching the little animal.

“Well, you’ve read plenty of books since then,” Ginny said reasonably.

“That’s true,” Harry said. “I could name it after a Quidditch player or something.” The cat made an unhappy sound, which made Harry smile and pick him up again. “You don’t like that?”

The kitten settled against his chest, tail lightly tapped his shirt.

“How about Herpo?” Ginny asked.

Harry’s eyebrows raised in uncertainty. “Herpo?”

“Yes. Started with the same letter as Hedwig, so it could be like a theme for you.”

“As in Herpo the Foul?” Harry asked, ignoring her clever idea entirely.

“Yes.”

“The man who first bred basilisks?”

“Yes.”

He paused before responding, looking at the happy little grey kitten and then back at a grinning Ginny. The kitten made a happy sound.

“Would you like to be named after the nutter who invented the gigantic snake that almost ate me and Ginny?” Harry asked. The cat purred. “Well, all right. Herpo it is.”

“I am so good at naming pets,” Ginny said smugly. “Pig wouldn’t answer to anything else after my suggestion either.”

Harry smiled, only to ask, “What made you think of Herpo?”

“Well, besides alliteration, I was thinking about Voldemort.”

“You said his name. That an improvement.”

“That’s not his name,” Ginny said. “His name is Tom Marvolo Riddle, and that’s the name I think of when I hear about the people he’s hurt.”

Harry watched her carefully, strong and confident. “That’s good. He fears that name.”

“I thought he only feared Dumbledore,” Ginny said, trying to lighten the mood. “And you.”

“He’s irritated by me, and respects Dumbledore’s power, but his own Muggle name? That’s the thing he fears and hates most,” Harry said, oddly positive. “It reminds him that he’s mortal.”

Ginny had always known that Harry and Voldemort shared a lot. She knew better than most that their childhoods had been similar. But the men they’d grown up to become were such polar opposites that it was hard to imagine they had anything in common. Still, Harry seemed to know a lot about Voldemort’s thought patterns. As much as Ginny herself knew about the sixteen-year-old boy who would become the abomination Harry knew. She imagined that he had it much worse.

“And the name Herpo,” Ginny said, holding the kitten, “will always remind you that the best laid plans—even those set in motion a thousand years ago by a grumpy founder—can be ruined by a twelve-year old with a sword and bird.”

Harry smiled. “If I had a pet for every time someone tried to kill me we’d have a zoo at Spinner’s End.”

Ginny laughed. “You’d have to bring in Blast-Ended Skrewts to properly convey the danger.”

“At least a half dozen,” Harry agreed, smiling.

Herpo wriggled down again, and started padding through the whole room. It was nice to see Harry smile.

“Plus,” she said, “I thought ‘Herpo’ sounded cute.”

He shot her a patronizing look. "A bloke's pet shouldn't be considered cute."

"Hedwig is cute."

"Hedwig is regal."

She smirked. "Sure."

"You're ruining it."

"Potter, it's a bloody cat, not a bulldog. I don't think your masculinity is going to implode because I think your cat's got a cute name. Most people will probably get stuck on the bit about basilisks and never even get to the innate cuteness." She smiled and looked at Herpo. "Let's go see if lunch is ready."

The cat meowed in agreement, and Ginny could hardly contain her mirth when Harry, despite his earlier protests against cuteness, could be caught nuzzling the small grey kitten on his shoulder as they trekked down for lunch. Ginny felt she could have kissed him right then, but quickly thought better of it.

Dinner that night had been a lively affair, as the twins had dropped in for some home-cooked food. Harry sat next to Ginny, looking more relaxed than he had all summer.

"Oh, Harry, we were looking for you earlier," Hermione said, trailing off at the end as she watched Herpo scamper down Harry's body to leap onto the ground and scamper over to where Crookshanks was in the corner. The much smaller kitten playful rubbed against the half-kneazle, who watched it with amusement before leaving the room, the kitten faithfully following.

"Is that your kitten?" Hermione asked. Harry shrugged and nodded. "It's adorable."

"It is, isn't it?" Ginny agreed with a smile.

"This is your fault," Harry groaned while Ron and the twins sniggered.

“She doesn’t even know the name. It’s not my fault you have an adorable kitten.”

But the damage was done as Ron and the twins immediately started teasing him.

The remaining days before September went by quickly in a haze of flying, laughing, studying, and apparition. Every spell Ginny managed made her feel that much more powerful.

The only change to the routine was that Herpo had to be banned when Harry and Ginny were practicing spells because they learned very quickly that his magical ability included unexpectedly pushing Harry out of the way of incoming spells.

“What the hell?” Harry had asked when he found himself two feet from where he’d been.

Herpo looked very, very pleased with himself as he trotted away.

The next time it happened, they realized the problem and locked the cat out of sight of their practice area.

That cat was loyal and pretty defensive, and very rarely left Harry’s side, unless Ginny forcibly took him from Harry. And then, inevitably, the cat would find its way back to Harry’s lap, wherever he was, and Harry barely noticed.

Whenever Harry would whine or complain or be otherwise annoying, Ginny formed a habit out of picking up Herpo and talking to him instead of his owner, calling Harry names and generally mocking him until he laughed, got the hint and took back possession of his kitten.

About the fourth or fifth time this happened, Harry had voiced his chagrin that Herpo seemed to be a willing accomplice. Ginny told him that his kitten liked her better. Harry stuck out his tongue at Ginny, and she laughed, which made Harry smile. Ginny liked it when he did that.

But then came the day, one week before Hogwarts, when Harry had fidgeted so much that Ginny finally put down her quill and turned to him.

“What is it?” she asked.

“What?”

“You’re distracted,” she said, nodded at his foot, which he’d been tapping. He stilled immediately.

“I’m fine,” he said, and she just stared at him.

“Okay, liar,” she said lightly, going back to her book. The headmaster had spoken to Harry for a few hours in private the day before, and all Harry would say about it was that Dumbledore planned to tutor him in certain subjects, though he didn’t know which ones yet.

Harry visibly shook himself, as if trying to rid himself of doubts, and smiled. “Forget I said anything.”

Which was impossible, but Ginny was very good at pretending like things were fine. She managed to suppress her curiosity by thinking about her friends whom she would see soon.

Thinking of them made her curse for the millionth time the rule against owling from Spinner’s End. She desperately wanted to write Luna, Kerney, Andy, and Neville. A quick note to Nadine would be nice, and she was dying to write Katie Bell and her Quidditch friends from other houses about her new broom. Roman Keselica, the Keeper for Ravenclaw, would have kittens if he knew she had a brand new Retro. Another player from her year, Jamie Bowen (the only female Beater at Hogwarts in twenty years) would be excited for the challenge.

Ginny’s musing about her friends was interrupted when Herpo slinked into the room. That could only mean one thing, Ginny knew as she sat up in her bed. And indeed, a few seconds later, Harry poked his head around the door.

"Hey, Gin," he said, eyeing her packed trunk and the clean room. "You all set to go back tomorrow?"

"No," Ginny said. "I'm going to miss my patio."

"Our patio," he said, smiling as he came further into the room, side-stepping around Herpo as had become his casual habit since discovering the little fur ball.

"You're bringing Herpo to school?" Ginny asked, nodding at the kitten.

"Hedwig would probably bite my ear off if I didn't," Harry grouched, looking down at the little guy who was now trying to crawl up his trousers. "I thought pets were supposed to be jealous of new animals. Aunt Marge always said so."

"Not when one of those animals is irresistibly adorable," Ginny said, grinning.

Harry waved that off. "Anyway, I wanted to let you know that I'm continuing the D.A."

"You are?" she asked, failing to hide the excitement in her voice. "I thought you didn't think we'd need it anymore."

"And we probably won't if we have a decent professor, but Hermione pointed out that it wouldn't exactly hurt to keep up," he said, shrugging. But Ginny knew that the club had meant a lot to him, too.

"That's true," Ginny said.

"But I don't know if everyone will want to come back," Harry said, sitting on the edge of her bed and grabbing Herpo with one hand. "And a few people can't because they left school, like your brothers—"

"No one left quite like them."

"Right, but I was thinking of inviting a few more people," he said, and her eyebrows went up. "Not everyone. Not like a regular school club,



which Hermione said requires an adviser and official petitions. But just a few more, like maybe your closest friends.”

“Because inviting Michael along worked out so well,” she said sardonically.

Harry smiled. “It helped us recruit a few more Ravenclaws, at least.”

She smiled back. So there was a silver lining.

“There are a few people in my year who I would like to bring,” Ginny said, thinking of Andy, Kerney, and maybe Nadine.

“All right. As long as you trust them. We don’t have a hexed parchment anymore,” Harry said with a half-smile.

“But it was so nice when Hermione used her gifts for evil,” Ginny said. Seeing Marietta with the word ‘SNEAK’ across her forehead after ratting them out to Dumbledore had been perfect.

At that moment, Remus came through the door connecting his room to the study. Herpo sprang from where he had been resting on Harry’s lap, hopped across the desk, and leaped at an amused Remus, who caught and cradled him deftly as he spoke to the teenagers.

Smiling at Herpo’s obvious affection for him, Ginny said, “Hi, Remus.”

“I’ve been sent to check on your packing progress,” Remus said, smiling.

“Tell Mum I’m done, and ask if I’m her favorite,” Ginny said.

“I haven’t started,” Harry said. “But don’t tell her that.”

“Okay,” Remus said, “but just remember we have to be out of here first thing in the morning.”

There was a certain comfort to putting on a pleated skirt, knee socks, an oxford shirt, and worn-in Doc Martens again. It was the same

comfort she found waking up in her four-poster in the girl's dormitory of Gryffindor Tower, where she could turn to her left and know Nadine would be there, still sleeping like the dead, or she could roll back over to her right, knowing that Kerney would wake up the moment Ginny tried to sneak out of bed. She smiled at the thought. Just a few hours and she'd see her friends again.

With a crimson and gold striped tie hung loosely around her neck, Ginny rolled her sleeves up to just below her elbows, put her hair into a ponytail, and turned to her trunk. As she ran through her last-minute checklist and locked her trunk one last time, she could hear her mother yelling up for everyone to hurry downstairs or they were going to be late. Grabbing her trunk in her right hand and her Retro's box in her left, she dragged her school things out into the hall to be levitated down the stairs.

"All set?" Remus asked, floating her things in front of her.

"Yep. I even checked under the bed for socks," Ginny said, smiling.

"Good," he said, and set off down the flights of stairs.

A certain amount of banging and grunting had Ginny turn around to find Harry trying to negotiate between Hedwig, Herpo, and his trunk.

"Aww. Too much to carry for two little hands," Ginny said.

"Too many pesky animals is more like it," Harry muttered.

Hermione came out in the hall from her room. "If you'd brought your trunk down first, you'd have been fine."

"Herpo wouldn't let me."

"Right. Because that little kitten is so bossy," Ron said, joining them from his room. Then he looked at Hermione. "There. I checked it over again. Are you happy?"

She looked pointedly at the two shirts in his hands. "Yes."

“Bossy kitten. Bossy witch,” he muttered to Harry, who nearly laughed.

“I’ll take the cute, little kitten,” Ginny said, holding her hands open for Herpo, who charged at her. Crookshanks watched the proceedings calmly; he and Herpo actually got along really well. The two walked in sync sometimes, and they acted like very formal brothers, proper and respectful. Crookshanks, at the very least, calmed Herpo down a great deal.

They headed downstairs and were ushered to the fireplace by a predictably frazzled Mrs. Weasley, who told them to floo right away.

“Oh shoot,” Ron said. “My books are in the study.”

Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Mrs. Weasley stared.

“What?” Ron asked, annoyed. “I had work to do, too.”

“Sure, but we never thought you’d do it,” Ginny said.

Mrs. Weasley looked at the large grandfather clock across the way. “I don’t have time to help you look. I have to--”

“I’ll help him, Mrs. Weasley. Go ahead, you two,” Hermione said to Harry and Ginny as she grabbed Ron’s hand and tugged him quickly from the room.

Harry motioned for Ginny to go first. “I’ll help your mum and be right through. Take care of my cat.”

Stepping up the fireplace, she threw down her floo powder and yelled, “Grimmauld Place,” and stepped in.

Much as the spinning was irritating (and a little painful if you weren’t careful), Ginny was grateful for the floo’s ability to move her quickly over large areas. Taking the Knight Bus wasn’t her idea of an easy ride.

She was just starting to contemplate that she had forgotten exactly how much she disliked flooing when she was tossed

unceremoniously through the fireplace at her destination, colliding with someone in the kitchen. That someone had caught her awkwardly around the waist, and managed to do so without the two of them falling over.

Head still looking down and checking to make sure she still had Herpo in one hand, Ginny used the person's arm to steady herself with the other. When she did, she looked up to see that her helper was Draco Malfoy.

Starting at this realization and backing away, she inadvertently squeezed Herpo a little too hard and he let out a small yelp. This briefly drew her and Draco's attention to the kitten, but then they had to look at one another again.

"Are you a ghost?" Ginny asked. They were now a couple feet apart.

"Wouldn't that make you happy, Weasley," he said meanly.

"No," she said, "because that would mean you're haunting this place, and then I'd have to deal with you for years."

"I keep you from tripping over your own ungrateful feet and you insult me," he sneered. "Poor and poorly mannered."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Thank you," she said, dripping sincerity. "I suppose you would have been perfectly courteous if you found me in your house unexpectedly, huh?"

"This isn't your hovel," Draco said. "It's my mother's family house, and your protections can't keep me away while I have a blood relative present."

"I didn't know you were warm enough to have blood."

He sneered. "This is my home by all rights."

"I cleaned it," she said, as if to prove her right to the house, only realizing how stupid that sounded and how many insults it set her up for after she'd said it.

“Exactly. You’re a maid. Not a resident,” he said.

At that moment, Harry came tumbling out with Hedwig’s cage (and a screeching Hedwig), knocking Ginny over again, but all the way to floor this time.

“Sorry, Ginny,” he said, holding out a hand to her. He’d managed to bounce off of her and stay on his feet. She took his hand and stood.

“This is a blast,” she muttered.

Draco’s eyes narrowed, and it was then that Harry spotted his enemy.

“Is that the only way you can touch a witch, Potter, by blindsiding them?”

Instead of feeling as surprised as Ginny and lashing out, Harry merely narrowed his eyes. “Where’s your babysitter, Malfoy?”

“Right here,” Tonks said, hurrying into the room. “Sorry. I had to talk to a portrait and leave my cousin unattended for a moment.”

“You knew he was going to be here?” Ginny asked Harry, which was the biggest problem she had with this scenario in her head.

“His mother asked Tonks’s mother for help. This was the solution everyone thought was best,” Harry said, rolling his eyes.

“What? You think you’re the only one who should be able to hide?” Draco asked meanly.

“Right, because that’s what Harry’s been doing ever since he fought Voldemort for the fourth time. Hiding,” Ginny said sarcastically. Draco jumped at the name, and Tonks swatted him, annoyed.

“We talked about that,” Tonks said. “Toughen up.”

“Didn’t you learn anything about self preservation in that Auror training program? You don’t just say the Dark Lord’s name,” Draco

said, but without his usual malice. He seemed to genuinely like his cousin. Or at least, he wanted her to like him. Which would have been really odd considering the fact that she was a half-blood, but Tonks was just that kind of person: everyone wanted her to like them.

Tonks sighed. "He doesn't like Aurors very much, but he may have just learned that from his old man. And he doesn't mind me."

"Though the hair leaves something to be desired," Draco said, eying her.

She made it long and blonde. "I could wear it like this, but then I'd look like you."

To Ginny and Harry's continuing shock, Draco didn't flinch with anger or lash out at Tonks. His face was tired and carried little of its usual resentment.

"You can only dream," he said weakly.

Just then, Ron came sliding out of the fireplace with Pig, not falling since he was already half on the ground as he arrived. Ginny snorted and Harry smiled. Draco rolled his eyes.

"The bright future of the light side arrives," he drawled.

Hermione landed softly and easily on her feet, Crookshanks nestled in one arm. Remus followed, explaining that their trunks had been taken straight to Hogwarts.

Then Ron noticed Malfoy standing next to Harry and Ginny. Hermione must have sensed the coming explosion, because Ron had barely started to yell when he was promptly shut up with a well-placed elbow to the ribs. It looked like Hermione had actually knocked the wind out of him, and the four of them couldn't help but chuckle at Ron's surprised breathlessness. Draco looked maliciously pleased.

"Ready to go?" Remus asked the group. Adjusting her hold on Herpo, Ginny nodded and watched as the werewolf pulled a fork out of his pocket. Portkey. Awesome. Way better than Floo. "Everybody get a

hand in, quickly now.” They all reached in and Ginny held onto Herpo tightly as a whirlwind jerked behind her navel, whisking her off to King’s Cross.

## CHAPTER 4

### Welcome Back, Awesome

Ginny landed easily on the deck of Platform 9 3/4, Herpo still clutched comfortably against her chest. Moving her Gryffindor tie from where it had flipped up into her face, she straightened her skirt and looked around to see that they were all obscured from view by brick columns separating Platform 9 3/4 from where the next numbered platform would have been in a normal train station. Having gotten her bearings, she looked past where Harry was standing next to her, only to see Malfoy already walking away from them, head held high, snobby countenance firmly back in place.

"He didn't waste any time, did he?" she remarked.

"Ron and I should go check in with the other Prefects," Hermione announced, straightening the big shiny "P" on her robe. She was the only one wearing her school robes, and Ginny wondered why on Earth she bothered with it. Most of the sixth and seventh year students rarely wore them, even at school, and practically no one wore them on September first until they arrived for the welcoming feast.

Well, maybe it was a stretch to say that Ginny wondered why Hermione bothered with the tedious robe; of course she would. She was Hermione.

"We'll find a compartment. See you, then," Harry replied. Hermione and Ron waved goodbye to Remus and set off to fulfill their duties. Remus turned to Harry and Ginny. After a moment's hesitation and a glance at Harry, Ginny stepped forward to hug Remus quickly.

"Thanks for everything," she said as his arms tightened around her.

"You did most of the work yourself," he said kindly.

"I don't mean just that," she said quietly.

"Thank you," he said.



“Have a good year,” she said, stepping back.

“I’ll try,” he said, nodding. “Take care of yourself.”

“Please be careful,” she said evenly, though the turmoil in her eyes betrayed her uncertainty and worry. Remus nodded and offered a small smile. Ginny backed away to allow Harry a chance to say goodbye.

Harry Potter had watched the exchange, but now he was looking at his father’s best friend intently. They were the same height.

“I know you’ll be busy,” Harry began, hands in his pockets.

“I’ll contact you, Harry,” Remus assured him. “And I’ll be at Spinner’s End at Christmas, if I can.”

It was almost heartbreaking, watching these two emotionally stunted wizards fail to adequately express what the other one meant to them. They’d both grown up expecting hatred and loathing from people, and didn’t trust that the other would really stick around.

“Bye, Remus,” Harry said, nodding politely. Ginny wanted to push him at Remus, force them into a hug, but knew that neither one would approve. Still, when they shook hands, she looked away toward the people boarding the train to give them some privacy.

When she turned back, Remus and Harry were exchanging quiet words. Ginny tried to look anywhere other than them. Harry nodded at something Remus said and they both straightened and nodded their goodbyes one more time.

The warning whistle got Harry’s attention and, with a last glance at Remus, Ginny grabbed his hand and started gently pulling him toward the train. He soon got the message, but didn’t shake her off as they both turned back to the werewolf.

“Be careful,” Remus reminded them, not quite reaching his usual standard of composed-ness. Then he told them to “behave

themselves” and he nearly smiled. This brought small grins to the faces of the two teenagers who waved and shouted their last goodbyes as Ginny continued without thinking to lead Harry toward the train. Since both their gazes were trained on Remus as they walked away, they were not watching (or rather, Ginny was not watching) where they were going and collided with someone’s trolley. Harry’s grip on her hand tightened and prevented Ginny from taking her third spill of the day, but when they turned around again, Remus had gone.

Having extracted her hand from Harry’s, Ginny used both hands to straighten her skirt. Harry grabbed it back and pulled her onto the train just as the final whistle began to blow.

Ginny sat by the window in a compartment halfway up the train, hands folded around Herpo, who was curled up in her lap and watching the discussion going on across the way. Luna had reported that the Gryffindor Prefects were Kerney Scott, one of Ginny’s best mates, and Othello Johnson, Angelina’s non-Quidditch-playing younger brother. His appointment in place of Andy McGrath (Ginny’s other best mate) was a shock.

“I wish I could have owled Kerney this summer!” Ginny said, leaning back in her seat.

“She’ll do a good job,” Luna said, blinking at Ginny.

“The Kernel?” Ginny asked with a smile. “Of course she will.”

“And Andy will be Head Boy if he learns to be more assertive with strangers,” Luna noted, speaking as bluntly as always. The notorious space cadet was perched next to her, taking up two spots as she leaned against the opposite wall of the compartment, knees bent, feet on the seat next to Ginny.

“Probably,” Ginny agreed, thinking of Andy. He was one of the most relaxed people she had ever met, actually, but rarely felt comfortable around people he didn’t know well. “I don’t think Stevie’s up for any accolades, though.”

“No. He’s too much like you. Too wild,” Luna said, smiling. “It’s why he likes you.”

Stevie McGrath, Andy’s little brother, was a third year, and he and his friend Nadia Ryan were two of the biggest troublemakers at Hogwarts. They’d been two of the many, many students to try to cleverly make up for Fred and George’s absence the year before. They’d been the ones to create the Never-Still Bouncing Balls that drove Umbridge so mad. Quite the feat for a pair of second years.

“Wish I could talk to them,” Ginny said, thinking of Andy and Kerney. But the prefects were still in their compartment, and Luna was the first person Ginny ran into on the train. They had grabbed a compartment together, and were soon joined by Neville. She had thought her other friends would find her, but it had been a while and that seemed unlikely. They’d probably all piled into a compartment together somewhere else, and expect that Ginny would find them eventually.

In the meantime, Neville sat across from Ginny, with Trevor in his lap, and Harry Potter sat next to him talking about Neville’s new wand. With Hermione and Ron in the Prefect compartment too, it made sense that he’d joined them after peaking inside.

“Don’t think Malfoy will mess with me again with this,” Neville said, sitting up straighter and holding out with shiny new wand.

“He’d be a fool to try,” Ginny agreed.

“Or delusional. I’ve heard he traveled abroad over the holiday. He might have encountered any number of insects,” Luna said, drawing an elaborate dragon with the point of her wand leaving a sparkling trail behind.

“He’d run away from anything dangerous,” Neville scoffed, making Harry smile. Something seemed different about Neville. He seemed to still be the clumsy, awkward boy he had always been, but as he fingered his wand and conversed with Harry, there was a lack of hesitation. An absence of shame. Whatever the right word was,

Neville no longer stuttered, no longer avoided maintaining eye contact with Harry, and spoke articulately. And he looked taller.

It was subtle, but Ginny thought it was almost as if he had been freed of constraints of some type, as if he was no longer being held down by some unseen barrier that had kept his head and shoulders down, kept his voice soft and unheard.

"He'll be running from the whole D.A. this year, probably," Harry said.

"You're keeping it up, then?" Neville asked, eyes lighting up.

Harry nodded, and explained what he intended to do.

"That'll be fun. I liked having friends," Luna said, joining the conversation.

"You'd have friends whether or not there was a D.A.," Ginny said, kicking her lightly on the ankle.

Luna smiled, but didn't say anything.

"Do you think we'll be able to go over Patronus Charms again?" Neville asked, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "I had mine almost corporeal last year before we were caught."

"Sure," Harry said, nodding. "I know a lot of people wanted to continue with that last year."

Ginny inadvertently froze at the memory of the last time she had cast the spell, causing Luna and Harry to glance at her in curiosity.

"You okay?" Harry asked.

"Just thinking of Dementors," she said. "Big, robed, floating Dementors."

The boys still looked confused.

Trying to play it off by adjusting Herpo's position in her lap, she kept her eyes carefully trained on Neville. Harry turned back to answer his friend, but Luna kept her eyes on Ginny. The redhead and she just stared at each other, Ginny doing her utmost to hide her discomfort at such a searching gaze. Luckily, it was broken by a knock and the compartment door opening.

Ron and Hermione bustled into the little room, obscuring the view into the hall, and talking about what they had seen and heard on the train.

"Oh, I'm so relieved," Hermione began. "Slytherin has a new prefect. Draco's still one, of course, but at least Pansy Parkinson's been replaced. Daphne Greengrass is the new one, and she's not an idiot, at any rate."

Ron had begun his usual tirade about Malfoy, when another voice floated in through the doorway: "Ginny?"

Her eyes brightened at the familiar voice as Andy McGrath leaned around Hermione to look into the compartment. Ginny immediately sprang up in excitement and shoved the kitten into Harry's lap as she leaped toward Andy and hugged him tightly.

"Andy! How was your summer?" she asked him, eyes closed as his arms squeezed her tight. She was much more happy to see him than she had anticipated. He was one of her best mates, and one of the few people that didn't see her as someone's sister or the girl Harry saved in the Chamber of Secrets; rather, the Weasleys were all her brothers and Harry's presence was secondary.

"Good. Traveled to Italy like usual with the Ryans," he said.

"I heard our friend Kerney's a big deal now," she said, grinning.

"No doubt she'll hate it, and strike fear in people's hearts as a Prefect," he said with his easy, friendly smile.

"And poor little me and you, having no power at all."

“You’d use it for evil,” he said with a sly grin. It was moments like this when Ginny remembered that Andy was, without question, the best looking bloke in their year. As a result, he received quite a bit of attention from the girls at Hogwarts. Ironically, he had very few female friends, mostly because any girls he met couldn’t stay just friends with him for long. Since there had never been (and never would be) a threat of that happening with Ginny since she was thoroughly obsessed with Harry, the two of them had become very comfortable around each other.

“I plan to use her power for evil anyway,” she said, laughing. Ginny didn’t notice that the conversation behind her had stopped, but as she did notice a tan, tallish girl with long black hair standing behind Andy in the corridor.

“Nadine!” Ginny smiled happily up at Andy as she made her way over to her other friend, greeting her with a smile and hug as well. As she approached, she watched Nadine’s expression shift from feeling out of place to a small, warm smile at Ginny.

“Hey Ginny,” Nadine replied as she returned the hug.

“You enjoyed Italy, too?” Ginny asked. Nadine was one of the three Ryan sisters, gorgeous girls who were very close to the McGrath family. Unfortunately, their parents had thought it was cute to give them all names that started with ‘N,’ so there was a lot of confusion.

“I enjoyed beating Andy at Muggle football with some friends,” she said, grinning. And there they stood, Ginny in the doorway, Andy leaning against the doorframe and Nadine standing opposite Ginny.

“Where are the runts?” Ginny asked, glancing up and down the corridor.

“Well, your boyfriend is probably trying to talk Nadia out of getting in some type of trouble,” Andy said, “and Nadia is undoubtedly buttering him up so that he’ll cave.” Nadine rolled her eyes, but failed to completely hide a grin. Their younger siblings were a handful.

“Oy! Ginny!” Ron shouted from within the compartment. Ginny turned half-around so that she was facing Andy and her brother at the same time.

“What?”

“Did he say you have a boyfriend?” Ron asked, nodding at Andy, who smiled. Nadine grinned wickedly while Ginny rolled her eyes and chuckled. Hermione and Harry were curious.

“Yes, he did, you eavesdropping git. What business is it of yours?” At this answer, Luna smiled, though the sixth years only became more confused.

“Well, who is it? Not Dean Thomas, right?”

“Dean is kind of dreamy,” Ginny said just to irritate Ron. It worked well.

“He’s in my year! That’s too old for you.”

“Bill’s dating a girl seven years younger than him,” Ginny said innocently. “Maybe I’ll go for someone out of Hogwarts already. Like a Quidditch player. Wouldn’t that be cool?”

Ron’s face scrunched up. “No. You’re not supposed to date anyone let alone—”

“Let it go, Ron,” Hermione muttered, hand on his arm.

“I will not. They said she has a boyfriend, and I want to know who he is,” Ron said.

“His name is Stephen McGrath, and we’re very serious about it,” Ginny said with a straight face. Her friends, on the other hand, were smirking.

“He finally won you over, Ginny?” Luna asked, the only other fifth year to look sincere.

"It took a while, but I think he's old enough now to handle me," Ginny said, nodding.

"This is not something I ever wanted to think about," Andy muttered under his breath. "But now there are images in my head that I can't get out."

Nadine smacked him on the back of the head, and he turned to her, outraged, but she just asked, "Didn't that help?"

"No."

She went to hit him again, but he caught her wrist.

"That wouldn't have helped either," he said, narrowing his eyes at her.

"I had to try. You're incapable of taking care of yourself," she said, not even bothering to pull her wrist away from him. He'd let go without hurting her, and they all knew it. Andy McGrath was nothing if not a good bloke.

"Who the hell is Stephen McGrath?" Ron asked, nearly bursting with frustration.

"My boyfriend. I thought you heard," Ginny said, smirking.

Andy rolled his eyes, letting go of Nadine and deciding to step in to stop a potential fight. "Stephen's my younger brother." Ron's eyes widened. "He's thirteen."

If Andy imagined this would end the joke, he didn't know Ron very well.

"You're dating a thirteen year old?" Ron exclaimed. Hermione actually groaned and sank onto the bench, putting her head in her hands. Harry seemed amused.

"That's gross, Ginny," Harry said, clearly in on the joke that his best mate had missed. "Who would've thought you were a cradle robber?"



"I like them young," she said, shrugging.

"Why are you dating a third year?" Ron still wasn't catching on, which just made Ginny want to keep the joke going forever.

"Ronald," Luna said. "She's lying to bother you."

Ginny turned to her. "You just had to spoil the fun, didn't you?"

"Ronald was turning purple, and that's a sign of—"

"So you aren't dating anyone?" Ron checked.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "You have the whole school year to figure that out for yourself, Ron. But I hope it doesn't take you as long as it did to figure out about Michael and me. I heard Hermione had to tell you, you were so blind."

"Well, there was kind of a lot going on last year, Ginny, if you remember," he reminded her.

Ginny had been all prepared to continue their jovial argument, but Ron's comment hit a nerve and set Ginny off. That last, condescending, 'if you remember' set her eyes ablaze, and the cool anger that began over the summer consumed her again.

"There's always kind of a lot going on with you, isn't there? Can't even notice when I start killing chickens with my bare hands," she shot back. It was a low blow, and Ginny knew it. But she couldn't help feeling some demented bit of satisfaction at the way her brother's face blanched and the way Hermione's face paled as she looked between the two.

It was Harry's face, watching her without pity or any surprise, that made her feel a brief pang of regret for throwing Ron's blindness in his face. It wasn't like anyone else had noticed, and Ron had just been twelve at the time.

But Ginny was sick of being an afterthought to her own brother. She had never been one to Neville or Luna or any of her other friends at

Hogwarts. She had no illusions about ever breaking into the trio, but sometimes their collective self-centered-ness made her want to scream and hit things and blow stuff up with her wand.

Just then, Ginny was broken out of her thoughts by Herpo, who had escaped from Harry and was now attempting to climb up her leg. She bent down and snatched him up, switching immediately into an affectionate countenance as she handled the kitten. If anything, this only served to bewilder the sixth years further.

Andy looked at both Luna and Ginny as he asked, "We're going down the train; you want to come?"

Luna stood up and straightened her uniform as she walked over to the door where Ginny was standing.

"See you later, Neville, Harry, Ron, Hermione," she said.

Ginny waved too. "Harry, I'm taking your cat."

With a slight nod toward the hall, she and Luna exited the compartment to join Andy and Nadine.

The passage of a few hours found Ginny farther down the train, laughing so hard her stomach hurt. Holden Fisher (another Gryffindor in her year) had just transfigured Andy's tie into a large, pink bow, put it on his head, and done an absolutely wicked impression of Umbridge. He had her 'hem hem' down to an art form.

As she laughed, Herpo struggled to keep his balance precariously on her thigh. She was sitting on the floor of the compartment, legs spread out in front of her, with Andy next to her and Colin sitting up on the seat behind her.

"Where'd the Kernel run off to?" Ginny asked when the compartment began to settle down again.

"Rounds," several people answered at once.

“Why isn’t Othello with her then?” Ginny asked, nodding at the boy who was the fifth year Gryffindor Prefect.

“The Head Boy and Girl paired us up across the houses. I’m with that blonde Hufflepuff named Cindy,” Othello said.

“Short, smart, dating that Derek bloke?” Ginny asked.

“That’s the one,” Othello agreed.

“Still can’t believe Dumbledore made a Slytherin Head Boy,” Colin commented.

Ginny had a feeling that Colin’s fervent devotion to Harry had incited this sudden skepticism. Too much time watching Ron instead of Harry, she mused. Perhaps the boy had begun to follow her brother as a model of Potter-loyalty.

“Baron Ramsey’s alright,” Ginny countered. “A bit serious, but he plays really decent Quidditch.”

Othello nodded in agreement. “He was very prepared in the meeting. He knew all of our names, assigned seats, had an itinerary and minute-taking quill, and discussed long-term goals for the year. The Head Girl looked like a kid next to him.”

“Thank you for reaffirming why I was so gloriously happy not to be named a Prefect,” Ginny said. “Boring meetings, tedious work, and rounds.”

“It wasn’t boring,” Othello said. “He was compelling, actually.”

“Compelling?” Colin repeated mockingly.

Othello glared over at him. “You had to be there.”

“Sounds like it,” Colin said.

But Ginny believed it. Baron Ramsey, no matter that he was a Slytherin, demanded the sort of respect people usually awarded to

authority figures. He always had, as far as Ginny could remember, and his appointment as Head Boy had been no surprise.

"This year going to be dangerous, do you reckon?" Andy leaned over and whispered in her ear, keeping one eye on the mischievous Herpo and one hand behind his head to guard against Nadine, who had taken to periodically whacking the back of it when she wanted to know something.

"I dunno," Ginny responded as Nadine struck again. When Andy had turned back from making a face and pinching Nadine's leg (she yelped in surprise), Ginny continued. "I would hope it would be a mix between the calm of second year and excitement of destroying Umbridge."

"Second year wasn't calm. A convicted mass murder broke into the school on Halloween," Nadine said.

"Oh. Right," Ginny said. "I forgot."

"You forgot?" Nadine repeated.

Ginny nodded. "But still, no one was hurt, right? It was just a little excitement. Otherwise, it would've been a dull year."

"My life hasn't been dull since I became friends with you," Andy said.

"Mine has," Luna said, still reading the Quibbler. "It's only been exciting in brief bouts."

Herpo chose that moment of distraction to creep over next to Andy and lick the boy's hand. Andy jumped in surprise as Herpo scampered back to the relative safety of Ginny's lap. At Andy's pseudo-rage, Ginny (and by the sound of it, Nadine) chuckled with delight.

"Ruddy cat's a menace!" Andy insisted, as this was the fourth time Herpo had sneaked up on him. Andy was not the biggest fan of cats the world had ever seen, especially ones that licked him for sport.

Ginny thought this was one of the primary reasons that Nadine had requested a cat for a pet back in third year.

"Where'd you get that thing, anyhow?" Andy asked, keeping a suspicious glare on the little grey beast as it played with Ginny's tie.

"Oh, he's not mine," Ginny supplied without a second thought. When she stopped he looked at her in question. "He's Harry's."

At the mention of Harry's name, all conversations in the compartment halted and the other fifth years turned their attention to Ginny. She was startled to find that she now had everyone's undivided attention.

"What are you doing running about with Harry Potter's cat?" Holden asked.

"He likes me," Ginny answered simply. The room erupted in chatter.

"Harry fancies you!" Colin exclaimed.

Ginny quickly realized her mistake. "No! No. The cat likes me."

She pointed awkwardly at Herpo, who wound his way around her feet, basking in the attention of the whole compartment. Recovering from her falter quickly, she held the kitten up to her face in what had become her usual manner, and addressed him.

"Isn't that right, Herpo?" she said to him affectionately.

"Herpo?" Colin asked.

"Harry named the cat after Herpo the Foul?" Nadine added, watching Ginny closely.

"Seemed appropriate for such a fierce beat," she said, smiling at the kitten meowed.

"I'm sure things tremble in his wake," Nadine said.

"They should!" Andy said, swatting the kitten away as it once again made a play for his hand.

At that moment, Kerney burst through the compartment door, more disheveled than Ginny had ever seen her. She was only slightly taller than Ginny, with chestnut brown hair and matching eyes. Her slender build was far more like Luna's than Ginny's athletic, toned figure.

"Gin!" she practically yelled, without a trace of the excitement that Ginny had been expecting after more than two months separation. She quickly forgot to be put out once she registered the look of urgency in Kerney's eyes. The new Prefect must not have wanted to cause a rush over whatever was wrong, because she quickly collected herself.

"Could you help me with something?" she continued nonchalantly. She glanced almost imperceptibly at Luna. "And maybe Loony should come, too. I have a question about Charms that I need to take care of."

"Sure," Ginny said, standing and checking to make sure she had her wand in her pocket.

"I am very good at Charms," Luna said, rising gracefully to her feet and following swiftly.

Whether anyone else in the room saw through Kerney's bullshitting, Ginny didn't wait to find out. Handing Herpo off to a mildly protesting Andy, Ginny shared a small glance with Luna and rose from her seat calmly. "We'll be back. Don't miss us too much."

Once the door shut and they were safe from eavesdroppers, Kerney took off at a run, dragging Ginny with her.

"I saw Draco and his idiots heading down to Harry's compartment," she explained as they ran. Pant. Dodge perplexed-looking first years. Breathe. "And Hermione and your brother left for their next set of rounds already." Dodge fourth year. Pant. "So it's just him and Neville in there."

Harry could handle it, Ginny knew. Neville, too, for that matter. But that didn't mean they couldn't do with some help. Course they could. And Kerney knew it too, which was nice.

"I didn't want my first patrol to be marred by a fight. Baron Ramsey would strip me of all my power if Harry turned Malfoy into goo right now," Kerney said.

Ginny could hear Malfoy's obnoxious, drawling voice floating out into the hall and slowed down to a walk so she could collect herself for the coming confrontation. Facing Malfoy always required calm nerves and a quick mind. Ginny preferred not to sound like a bloody retriever after a romp in the park. Deep breath.

Putting her hair into a new ponytail quickly, she glanced gratefully at Kerney.

"Malfoy already hates us," Ginny said. "You don't have to come along."

"It's my patrol," Kerney said, shaking her head. "My partner's a nitwit Ravenclaw boy who just wanted to see his girlfriend. I'm coming too."

"You should finish your patrol," Luna said. "We'll be okay."

They didn't have time to argue, and Kerney knew it, so she bent to their wills and left them. Luna and Ginny turned to go join Harry together.

"You're a coward, Potter. Having your friends attack me. Just like your stupid godfather," Malfoy said. "The mutt got what he deserved."

Despite having thoroughly studied books on meditation just a week ago, Ginny quickly forgot herself in anger and let her emotions—and her magic—briefly rush out of control. One of the glass panels adjacent to the doorway of Harry's compartment burst and shattered.

Thinking quickly, Ginny grabbed her wand to prevent suspicion about her wandless capabilities and entered the small room to find gaping expressions on the faces of Neville, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle.

Harry's eyes snapped immediately to her, and he had to hide his amusement.

"Look, boys. Another little Potter lover," Malfoy sneered, though he seemed shaken by the exploding glass. "Here to beg him for a kiss?"

Ginny wondered briefly whether Malfoy was just going through the motions of his usual terrorism to keep up appearances after he showed up at Grimmauld Place so unexpectedly. Whether he was or not, Ginny decided to have a bit of fun with this. She pointed her wand at his chest and stepped up into his personal space. He tensed ever so slightly at her close proximity.

"Are you here to beg for another Bat-Bogey?" she asked, glancing meaningfully at the left side of his face. Without even looking at them, Ginny could sense Crabbe and Goyle hesitating. The whole Inquisitorial Squad remembered how she, Luna, and Neville had escaped their clutches the year before despite being outnumbered two-to-one. And with Ginny's comment, the three Slytherins seemed to realize they were in the same room as all of them, with the addition of Harry.

Well, bugger me, Ginny thought with some well-hidden surprise. The gits actually have the courtesy to look scared.

When Draco and the other two Slytherins made no move to leave, though, Ginny sighed in exasperation, but Harry cut her off.

"Leave, Malfoy. Now," he said, back straight and eyes blazing.

In a delayed reaction, Malfoy collected himself, cleared his throat, and turned to Harry.

"You better watch your back, Potter," he growled, but to much less effect than in previous years. Crabbe and Goyle tried to look menacing.

"We managed with Death Eaters. I think we can manage you," Harry replied to the Slytherins' surprise. Ginny smiled as the three Death Eaters' children made their way out at last.



"Draco is an extraordinarily poor actor," Luna mused out loud. So her mind was exactly where Ginny's was, it seemed. Harry looked surprised, whether at Luna's general perceptiveness or the fact that she had noticed a difference in Harry's nemesis without knowing he'd been at Grimmauld Place that morning, Ginny did not know. Neville just looked perplexed.

"True," Ginny replied with a small smile at her Ravenclaw friend.

"So were you too just walking by?" Harry asked, glancing at them.

"While Malfoy's voice does pierce walls," Ginny said, "my friend Kerney told us she'd seen him looking to make trouble."

The Kernel was very good like that. Smart when thinking on the fly and very observant. Kerney and Andy had both had their reasons for not going to the original D.A. meeting at Hogshead: Andy had promised his father that he'd look after Stevie, so he didn't think he should leave the castle, let alone for a secret meeting to defy the authority, and Kerney and Ginny hadn't become very close until midway through the year. By then, it was just too late to join.

Now, of course, she wanted them in the D.A. as soon as humanly possible, hopefully with their siblings as well. She did not want them, especially Stephen and Nadia who were younger, to be left vulnerable or unable to protect themselves. She knew very well that Death Eaters made no distinctions between adults and children in their violence.

Ron and Hermione bustling through the doorway interrupted her thoughts, causing Ginny to notice that broken shards of glass still lay scattered in the corridor.

"What happened?" Hermione asked, glancing from the glass to Harry, as if it had to have been his fault. It was a natural reaction, Ginny supposed, built from years as his close friend, but it was still mildly irritating.

“Malfoy stopped by, Ginny blew up a window, Malfoy left,” Harry replied, grinning subtly at Ginny as he threw her under the bus.

“You blew up a window on the Hogwarts Express?” Hermione asked, rounding on her friend.

“He said Harry’s godfather got what he deserved,” Ginny said, and Hermione’s face froze in a war between sympathy, empathy, and her need to reprimand. Ginny knew Hermione’s loyalty to Harry was unquestionable and that it ultimately took precedent over her devotion to following the rules.

“That was wrong of him,” Hermione said, “but you can’t blow up windows every time you’re mad.”

“What about paintings?” Ron asked. Sometimes, Ginny really loved her brother’s lack of tact.

“No one was hurt,” Harry said.

“I know people believe you about Vold-Voldemort now, Harry,” Hermione said, turning to address him. “But you’ll still be in trouble if the professors catch you fighting on the train, and you can’t afford that now.”

“I wouldn’t have to use magic,” Harry said. “Punching Malfoy would feel just as good as hexing him. And after sending Dementors to my home and calling me insane last year, the Ministry owes me a favor or two.”

“The Ministry owes my father one-hundred-and-two favors,” Luna said, smiling. “The first was for his role in the downfall of Muggle communism.”

Ginny smiled. Luna had succeeded in derailing Hermione’s focus. Excellent.

“Luna,” Hermione began, exasperated, “that doesn’t…”

Just as Ginny started thinking about heading back to the compartment with the rest of the fifth year Gryffindors, Harry noticed that she was no longer in possession of his cat. His brow furrowed in concern.

"Where's Herpo?" he asked, looking absolutely kissable. Ginny took a breath and banished that thought.

"Andy has him," Ginny replied. "But now that I think about it, I should have brought him. He'd have deflected any spell Malfoy could come up with."

Harry grinned, and quickly tried to cover it up. "Herpo is useful."

Ginny decided she wanted to leave immediately, both to check on the kitten and to lessen the chance that she would humiliate herself by jumping the boy in front of her, who looked particularly edible with that grin on his face. She glanced at Luna with a slight gesture toward the corridor, and Luna nodded once in agreement.

"Well, I don't see anymore threats to Harry's well-being in here. We're going to find snacks." They said their goodbyes and left, hearing a stern "Reparo!" as Hermione restored the glass pane to its original position.

"You can do wandless magic," Luna observed once they were out of earshot. Ginny thought this was her favorite part of being friends with Luna. She never overreacted or made a big deal out of anything.

"I discovered it this summer. Only a few people know."

"It comes after a soul-splitting," Luna said.

Ginny hesitated. "I've heard something like that."

They walked in silence for a while, but Ginny knew her friend well enough to know that their conversation was not done.

"Andrew and Nadine are in love with each other." Another statement.

“Pretty much,” Ginny agreed, with a sigh.

She adored these talks that she often had with Luna. There were always the same. It was like Luna would run down a checklist waiting for Ginny to confirm her observations, observations which were always dead on. This had the effect of calming Ginny’s nerves, served to make sure that the two of them were on the same page, and provided Ginny with a rare but reassuring glimpse of Luna’s astute and serious side.

“And you’re in love with Harry.”

Come again? Ginny could barely keep from stumbling as Luna spoke. Scratch that. She was not a fan of Luna’s sharp skills of observation.

“Excuse me?” she asked, but she should have known that Luna wouldn’t be that easy to deter.

“You’re in love with Harry, and are trying to hide it,” Luna said, “though I don’t know why. Half the girls at Hogwarts like him, and they don’t hide it. Even when they thought he was a nutter.”

“Well, I’m not most girls, I guess,” she said at last, almost hating the admission that her words gave away. But she couldn’t deny it. Not to Luna. And not after a summer of learning exactly how wonderful Harry was as a friend, how attractive he was when he was writing an essay on a subject he hated, or flying in the sky as if he wished he never had to touch down. He was funny, charming, and fun. Ginny almost wished he weren’t.

Luna nodded. “You’re closer now.”

“We spent time together.”

“He notices you more.”

“Couldn’t have noticed me any less,” Ginny grumbled.

Ginny turned back to looking straight ahead as she walked. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but something about Luna’s

combined bluntness and her way with words (especially when they were trained on Ginny) always made Ginny feel, if not more confident, then certainly less uncomfortable with herself. Ginny gave herself a small smile.

“His cat likes me,” she said almost by way of explanation. Luna glanced at Ginny and they shared a grin.

They arrived at the fifth year compartment to find their friends in a small uproar. The food cart must have already been by seeing as dozens of chocolate frogs were jumping wildly around the compartment. They were quite obviously charmed.

Andy seemed to have succumbed to his fate as he was sitting in the same spot on the floor, with Herpo curled up against his stomach. He looked up at them sheepishly as they entered the ruckus.

“Nadia and Stevie dropped by with the frogs,” Andy said.

“And you fell in love with Herpo,” Ginny said, sitting down beside him. Luna walked over her, snatching a chocolate frog out of the air and handing it to Colin.

“Not my fault. It’s an adorable cat,” Andy said, almost pouting. Ginny noticed Nadine’s left hand surreptitiously messing with the shaggy blonde locks near the back of his neck while she held a conversation with Holden across the way.

Sneaking a peek at Nadine, Ginny was more than a little amused to discover that the black-haired girl was making this little show of affection completely unconsciously.

The Ryans and the McGraths had been next-door neighbors since Andy was born. The two families were great friends, and their children had grown up together. Nadine and Andy had a younger sister and brother, respectively, both of whom were third years, and Gryffindors like their siblings. Unlike their siblings, Nadia Ryan and Stephen McGrath were best mates. Inseparable. A dynamic duo.

Nadine and Andy were quite another story.

Andy was usually easy-going and friendly, though not a particularly loud person. But whenever Nadine would sit down at the breakfast table, or sit next to them in the common room, his shoulders always tensed the slightest bit, and something in him—something that Ginny couldn't name—would switch on. Notwithstanding his sarcastic and negative words, it was almost as if his senses would come alive when Nadine was around.

"What?" Andy asked at her knowing look.

"Nothing," she said, drawn back into the present conversation. "Give me my cat back."

"Not your cat, Harry's cat." Andy let the kitten crawl over his hand, only to run back across it the other way.

"Fine. Give me Harry's cat."

"He seems happy with me," Andy said, smiling.

"No one's happy with you," Nadine called, almost without thinking because he'd set it up so easily.

Herpo trotted over to Ginny and crawled into her lap, and Andy shook his head. "Betrayed."

Ginny grinned. "Just because he's cleverer than you, don't take it out on him."

Andy rolled his eyes and adjusted his seat, which served to jolt Nadine into realization as to what she'd been doing. Blushing and yanking her hand back, she shook herself briefly and took a deep breath, finally returning to her conversation. When Andy leaned his head back against the seat, Ginny could tell he noticed the absence of her hand.

If she didn't know him quite so well, she wouldn't have noticed his shoulders tense up ever so slightly, or the way his reaction was confined to his dull blue eyes. But she did, and she had.

Kerney finished the conversation she'd been having with Colin (about her rounds, no doubt) and came over to sit on the floor next to Ginny, her back to the window. Finally able to greet her friend, Ginny smiled.

"Sorry, I couldn't write all summer," she offered. "Voldemort's a git."

"So you're saying his name now?" Kerney asked while the rest of the room jumped.

"Yes."

"Good. You were being an idiot before."

Ginny smiled. "I've missed your support these past few months."

At that point their heads whirled around to face the door as two small bodies came hurtling into the compartment, slamming the door closed behind them. Stephen McGrath and Nadia Ryan entered and went immediately over to the bench where Nadine and Andy were sitting, squeezing themselves into seats next to each other's older siblings. Cheeks pink from exertion, Nadia looked delighted, while Stevie looked nervously at the door.

"What did you two do this time?" Andy asked his brother, who sat between Nadine and Colin on the bench behind him. Stevie looked at Nadine and then Ginny, before his eyes rested on Kerney's Prefect badge, at which point his eyes widened at the prospect of getting in trouble. Ginny snickered while Andy looked pleased with his brother's reaction. The elder McGrath brother's attention was suddenly brought down to the floor when Nadia looped her arm through his and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"We're being chased by Slytherins," she said matter-of-factly. Andy looked amused at her.

"Why are they chasing you, you little menace?" Nadine asked.

"We may have hexed them," she answered simply, looking at Kerney's badge. It was such a Fred answer, that Ginny could not help but laugh.

"May have?" Andy asked.

"Plausible deniability," the younger girl answered, an adoring look on her face. Ginny snorted. Andy failed to keep in his smile.

Nadine interrupted. "Half-pint, how many times have I told you not to use words you don't know?"

"I know what plausible deniability means. Daddy said it means you keep things vague so you can always lie about them later. He says they do that at the Ministry all the time."

"Nadia!" scolded her older sister. Ginny and Andy laughed.

"What? That's what he said."

"Yeah, Nad, but Dad also works at the Ministry. I don't think he meant to get himself fired when he told you that. Keep your mouth shut."

Nadia appealed to Andy for sympathy with a look that usually melted the hearts of the third-year boys. Unfortunately for her, Andy wasn't in third year.

They heard the pounding of footsteps trample past their compartment and accompanying shouts. It was presumably the Slytherins that Stevie and Nadia had pranked. A hush went over the compartment as they heard muffled voices get progressively quieter as they proceeded down the hall. During the pause in conversation, Ginny appraised the two thirteen-year olds.

Stephen McGrath was a miniature version of his brother, only his hair was a slightly dirtier blonde and he wore glasses. And apparently all the awkward growth stages that had mercifully passed Andy by had been saved up for Stevie. Ginny had no doubt that he would be quite as good looking as his older brother in a couple years, but he would always be a little nerdier and a lot more uptight. Despite his bookish



tendencies, he was not scrawny, but very capably built. And he was completely obsessed with Quidditch.

Nadia, on the other hand, was a livewire. Strikingly beautiful as all the Ryan sisters were, Nadia was the most outgoing of them, and would likely break more hearts than the other two combined. She was by no means a snob, despite the fact that she was utterly spoiled by her parents, and probably the most trusting of the three sisters.

She and Stevie made an interesting pair, especially in comparison to their fifth-year siblings, but Ginny didn't think she could find a more loyal one. Perhaps Ron and Harry, or the twins. Maybe James Potter and Sirius Black, though she didn't know enough about Harry's father to judge. Andy had not been exaggerating when he said that Nadia had Stevie wrapped around her finger, because she definitely did. But it was okay because there was no person in the world who Nadia adored more than Stephen.

Moving her gaze to Andy's little brother, she caught him staring at her and he quickly looked away. She smiled knowingly. Conversation picked up again, and she heard a whisper from over her left shoulder.

"Better not let Ron find out," Kerney said. Clearly she hadn't heard about the earlier conversation. "He'll scare Stevie to death and then the poor kid will never get up his nerve to try out for Beater."

Ginny smiled and raised her eyebrows in surprise. She knew he was wild about the game, but she didn't know he played. The prospect of replacing Andrew or Jack excited her, even if it was a younger student. She shoved Andy to get his attention.

"Is it true Stevie's trying out for the House team?" she whispered, not wanting to embarrass Stevie. Andy grinned.

"You bet. He's been mental about it all summer. After watching Sloper and Kirke try to play for your brothers, he reckoned he couldn't do any worse."

"A blind hag could have done better, but Umbridge put all the good ones in detention during tryouts."

Andy laughed. Ginny turned to address his younger brother.

“Hey, Stevie,” she called, loud enough to draw the attention of the other inhabitants of the compartment. When she had his attention, she smiled. “I hear you’re trying out for Beater this year.”

Merlin love him, he blushed.

“Um, yeah. I am.” Her grin widened at his adorable shyness and she hoped he was encouraged by it. Of course, Andy was smirking at him, so the poor kid was probably terribly embarrassed.

“I didn’t know you played Beater. You don’t want to turn out like my brothers, do you?” she joked. He relaxed slightly.

“I wish.” He was warming up to the conversation now, despite being the center of attention among all older kids. But the topic was Quidditch, so if there was anything he felt comfortable talking about, it was that.

“What about a different position? Seeker?”

“Harry’s the best Seeker ever, and even if he couldn’t play, you would.” Ginny brightened at the compliment. “I watched you all last year. You didn’t miss the Snitch once. Even against Cho Chang, and she’s two years older than you!”

The fifth years all laughed at the mention of Ginny’s delicious victory over Cho. They, like her brothers, never let her forget that she ‘used’ to have a crush on Harry Potter, and they took great pleasure at talking up a great rivalry between the two girls. The fact that Cho hooked up with Michael Corner shortly after Ginny dumped him only added to their sport.

“That’s very nice of you, Stevie. But I reckon I’m a better Chaser than Seeker. That’s what I want to play this year—Oh! I can’t believe I forgot! You’ll never believe it. Guess what my stupid brothers got me for my birthday?” No one said anything, but looked at her in

anticipation. "A new Cleansweep Retro, The Gwendolyn Morgan Special Edition!"

"Bloody hell!" Stevie shouted, and everyone laughed. Nadine reprimanded him for his language, and he gave her an apologetic look. The compartment was buzzing with comments on her broom. Even though there were those in the wizarding world who didn't play, most wizards and witches knew the basics of the game and followed the gossip on players, teams, and equipment.

"Is the joke shop doing that well?" Colin asked.

"It's doing fantastically, but not so well that Fred and George could have bought it on their own. All six of those idiots went in on it together. It was brilliant."

"Even Percy?"

Ginny smiled. "Even Percy. Git. I reckon he'll be home soon. I'm not sure how I feel about that, and Ron is still furious with him, of course, but it's put Mum back to rights, so. . ." She shrugged. "I'm happy to be back at school, though. I don't fancy being at home when he might say something stupid and I'd end up hexing his face off."

"Percy's the only one that didn't play Quidditch, isn't he?" Stevie asked, mind still on more important things.

"Yes, he is. Charlie was a Seeker, Bill was a Chaser, and you've seen Ron and the twins. We'd have enough for our own bloody team if Percy wasn't such a nerd."

"Do you like Chaser because your brother played?"

"I liked beating my brother at that position," Ginny said with a grin.

"As if you could lose on that broom!" Colin interjected. "It would be a betrayal."

Everyone chuckled.

“True.” She turned back to Stevie. “Why, did someone in your family play Beater?”

Stevie beamed. “Yes. Our aunt was the only girl Beater since 1920 until Jamie Bowen made the Hufflepuff team. She was brilliant. My dad told me.”

“Wait.” She turned to Andy. “The girl Beater twenty years ago was your aunt?”

“That’s right, Tracy McGrath. Well, Tracy Merton, now. She’s a year younger than my dad, but she was a Gryffindor like us.”

“Your dad was in Ravenclaw, right?” Kerney asked. Andy and Stevie both nodded.

“Yeah, and so was our Uncle Will. Our mum was a Gryffindor, though,” Stevie added.

“Between her and Aunt Tracy, I guess that’s where we got it,” Andy said. The room was quiet for a moment.

Andy and Stevie’s mother had died when they were very young. Ginny had never met their dad, but figured he must be a good guy for the boys to have turned out so well. It probably helped that they were so tight with the Ryans. Family support and all of that.

Both Andy and Nadine had told Ginny at some point what they remembered about Mrs. McGrath. Andy had said that he knew she was blonde and tall. He also had the impression that she was very calm, comforting even when Andy had spilled milk all over the kitchen, laughing and letting him play in the mess before cleaning it all up. He couldn’t remember her ever raising her voice. Nadine had recalled that she’d spent almost as much time in the care of Andy’s mum as her own; they were always at each other’s houses playing or being minded by each other’s parents.

“Well, with any luck, you’ll have another Quidditch Cup winner in the family by June,” Ginny said to break the silence. The boys smiled. “If

we make the Quidditch final, you better invite your aunt to come watch. I'd like to meet her."

"Well, if I make the team—" Stevie began.

"You will," Andy finished for him. He seemed confident of his younger brother's chances. Excellent. Andy was not one prone to exaggeration, nor was he in the habit of giving others false hope. If he thought Stephen could make the team, then Stephen must be good. Well, that's one less idiot, Ginny thought hopefully.

The conversation shifted to the coming school year, O.W.L.'s, and outrageous speculation about the new DADA professor. As the train chugged toward Hogwarts, Ginny laughed with her friends, whispering now and then with Andy or Kerney, glancing at Stephen periodically, only to find him staring at her. She had always been shocked that he fancied her and not Nadia, who, even at thirteen, was already much prettier than she was.

And so went her fifth September 1st trip on the Hogwarts Express.

The carriage ride had been especially pleasant this year, as the sky was clear and the weather unseasonably warm. Someone—presumably Dumbledore—had charmed the carriages to be topless, so that they could see the sun setting as they rode from Hogsmeade up to the school. This also meant that they had an unobstructed view of the Thestrals; that is to say, Luna did. And Harry, too, she supposed. Twice over, now.

She felt a brief pang of sadness as she thought about all that Harry was dealing with.

When the carriages stopped, she climbed out of the one she had been sharing with Luna, Kerney, Nadine, and Andy. Heading up to the main entrance of Hogwarts, Ginny jumped when she heard her name.

"Ginny!" Then, louder: "Oy, Weasley!" She turned and saw her brother turn at their last name as well. She smiled when she saw

Roman Keselica, flanked by the fifth-year Ravenclaw Quidditch players, jogging to catch up with her.

“Hey,” she answered. The two groups of fifth years greeted each other and exchanged the usual post-holiday conversation.

“So what’s this we hear about Gryffindor’s newest Chaser?” Roman asked. “We were hoping maybe you’d be rubbish with a Quaffle or something. But a Retro? Are you serious?”

“Yeah, a Firebolt wasn’t enough?” another one added. “Now we have to deal with the two of the best brooms in one House?”

“Jealousy doesn’t become you, Roman,” Ginny said, shaking her head.

“Jealous? Please. We’re still the better team. I’ve seen your beaters.”

“Hufflepuff’s better than both of us. Let’s just ally against them,” she suggested as they passed through the entrance corridor and toward the Great Hall. The Ravenclaws laughed.

“Jamie’s going to have kittens,” Roman replied with a grin.

“That’ll be a wicked match-up, though, you versus them,” his friend added. “The best Beaters in the school against the fastest fliers. It’ll be a bloody good time as long as Potter doesn’t find the Snitch too soon.”

“Yes, that’s always been his problem. Too good at his job,” Ginny said. “I’ll talk to him about that.”

“He’s your captain this year, I heard,” Roman said.

“You heard no such thing,” Ginny said. “You’re just trying to trick me into telling you if it’s him or Katie Bell.”

Roman smiled. “Too clever for your own good.”

“You’ll have to wait and find out with everyone else.”

As they entered the Great Hall, the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws said their goodbyes and separated toward their House tables. Ginny told Luna to find her after the feast, and then set off with Kerney, Andy, and Nadine to meet up with the rest of the Gryffindors, sitting near the middle on the side with the rest of the older students. She and Nadine waved at Stevie while Nadia was chatting away next to him with another third year. Glancing back up the table toward the entrance of the Hall, she spotted the sixth years getting settled and waved to Neville, before exchanging smiles with Harry.

As McGonagall brought in the new firsties, Ginny scanned the staff table, identifying each of the returning professors until—oooh, a woman. Their Defence teacher was a woman for the first time (Ginny didn't count Umbridge, who was much more a foul, bloated toad than a human). She wondered what horrors lay ahead for them this year. For Harry, more like. She turned back and saw that he, too, had spied the new teacher.

Returning her gaze to the front, Ginny took in the newest addition to the faculty, who was seated next to Professor Snape. There was delicate piping on her robes, which were a dark grey instead of the severe black of the Potions Professor's. And they looked very well tailored. Expensive.

"Classy lady," Othello muttered next to Ginny, causing Andy, Nadine, and Kerney to look over at the staff table too.

"They said she was a curse breaker or something for the French Ministry," Nadine said.

"Had to import her from abroad because no one in England wanted the job," Andy said.

"She's pretty small," Kerney said.

"Doesn't mean she won't be good at Defence," Ginny noted.

"I heard she was a Slytherin when she went to school here," Nadine said, still watching the pretty blonde woman.

And then Ginny noticed that the subtle piping on the robes was green. A Slytherin? Please don't let this be yet another evil Defence professor!

Stopping every now and then to clap with her house as another "midget" (as Ron liked to call them) became a Gryffindor, Ginny studied the female professor and Professor Snape. He usually had a look of pure loathing on his face every year that he'd been denied the Defence job, but this year was different. Ginny thought Snape definitely knew the new teacher.

Oh, she was a Slytherin, alright. She had the same excellent posture as Snape, but on her it looked elegant—not tense like it did on the Potions Master. She was a good-looking woman and clearly had money, given her tailored robes and impeccably groomed countenance. With blonde hair, she looked like Ginny imagined Narcissa Malfoy might if she wasn't the central member of the two darkest families in Britain. The last first year was sorted into Hufflepuff, and Dumbledore rose to tell them to tuck in.

"Anyone know her name?" Ginny asked, grabbing a baked potato.

Her friends shook their head, but Kerney said, "Some of the Slytherin prefects were talking about her like they knew her, though. Thought she'd be good."

"I so wish Luna were here to tell you that was a symptom of some horrible disease," Andy said. "Defence professors are never good. They're just more or less evil than the last. It's a question of degrees."

"Aren't you feeling cynical today," Ginny teased.

"He's just grumpy," Nadine said, reaching around him for the water pitcher. "Like always, poor brute."

Ginny ate with a contentedness. Every few minutes she would glance up to the staff table, finally looking up to see the woman and Snape actually talking. Would wonders never cease?



They both had neutral expressions on their faces, and though Snape seemed to respect her enough to avoid open loathing, there was an interesting tension between them during the meal. It wasn't like it had been between Snape and Remus—raw hatred and bitter discontent—but more like deep disapproval from her to him. And it clearly chafed him.

Dumbledore commencing his annual speech interrupted Ginny's thoughts. She turned to glance at Harry, who didn't seem to be listening to the headmaster's spiel, either. But he wasn't looking at the new professor.

He looked as though he might be staring at the mashed potatoes in the middle of the table, but he was probably just staring into space. Ginny was confident that he was thinking about one of two things, neither of which would be pleasant.

“—and I hope you will join me in welcoming our new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, Gertrude Wrightman.” The woman stood up gracefully as everyone clapped, and holy! crap! The entire Slytherin table was applauding politely, watching the woman—who swept her eyes across them—very carefully.

“Told you,” Kerney whispered.

As if the summer hadn't been strange enough, fifth year didn't look like it was going to be any less puzzling.

Ginny turned to Andy next to her and had to snort in amusement as she saw Herpo perched comfortably in his shirt pocket. He had his robes on like everyone else, but had left them open in the front so that Herpo could look around. This was one of the most hilarious things she'd ever seen. If she had been at all attracted to Andy, she would have kissed him. But, fortunately for their friendship, she wasn't, and she settled for teasing him.

“You know Harry will want that kitten back eventually, right?” she teased quietly.

Toward the end of Dumbledore's speech, Herpo decided this was a good time to leap out of Andy's pocket and into Ginny's lap, at which point she shifted instinctively to catch him, but caught her knee in her robes and fell clear off the bench. And she yelped. Loudly. But she did catch Herpo.

Trying to scrape together what was left of her dignity, she was relieved when Andy offered a hand to help her up. Luckily (or unluckily, as they had caused the scene in the first place), she was wearing her robes over her uniform, so at least she wasn't flashing the whole student body as she got to her feet.

"And she caught it!" Duncan Moran yelled from the seventh year cluster at the end of the table, causing the Gryffindors to erupt with laughter. He turned to Harry. "I don't know, Potter, she might not give up that Seeker spot so easily." The tables laughed. With both Duncan and Harry smiling at her, Ginny dipped into a curtsey and then held Herpo up to the cheers of her fellow students.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. Snape looked around nastily, as usual. Yes, Professor Snape, Merlin forbid there be laughter at a school, Ginny thought. McGonagall was very nearly failing to look stern. Hagrid was beaming, of course, and Professor Wrightman. . .she was definitely intriguing.

Instead of scowling, this terribly refined woman looked right at Ginny, eyebrows raised ever so slightly as she carefully watched the fifth year.

Ginny gazed back at her, face still pink with the fading traces of embarrassment, eyes sparkling, an expression of amusement forming on her face. She nodded in greeting to her new instructor, and then turned back to her still-chuckling classmates, with Herpo cradled safely in her lap.

## CHAPTER 5

### Internal Battles

“Miss Weasley, stay after class.”

Snape had turned back toward his desk before Ginny could look up from her cauldron. She threw a couple more pine needles into the cauldron to offset the vapors. Snape was the second teacher to ask her to stay after class in two days, McGonagall having been the first on the previous afternoon. Her friends were definitely going to ask her about this today, if not now, then when the new Defense professor followed suit next period in double Defense.

“Popular, aren’t you?” Kerney asked under her breath, shooting Ginny a sideways look across the aisle. Oh yes, they’d be having a talk soon.

Then Ginny would have to explain that she had asked to take the O.W.L.s early and been denied in favor of doing projects. McGonagall had explained hers as a yearlong study of something of Ginny’s choosing, which she had immediately decided would be conjuring or healing. It would actually be really interesting work, she knew, though she’d have to do it in addition to her regular work and turn in weekly reports and meet with McGonagall.

Oh, who was she kidding? It wasn’t the O.W.L.s. The work would be done on her own time, with regular meetings with the professors, and it wouldn’t let her study the subjects that she really wanted to. Not with a professor. Not in a sixth year class.

“Don’t do that,” Ginny’s Potions partner said, pinning Ginny’s knife down with her own.

“I can cut the roots,” Ginny said.

“So can I,” came the even response. Then her partner, Devon Pearce, scooped the roots onto her work area and began methodically cutting them.

“I always do it.”

Devon’s knife quickly, precisely sliced the roots. “You’re distracted.”

It was the last ingredient in their potion before they had to turn it in, and now that Ginny looked down at the bubbling cauldron, she could let herself admit that Devon was right.

“I would have cut them well,” Ginny said.

“Probably,” Devon agreed, but she kept cutting and then adding them to the potion in pairs.

Many students in different years attributed Ginny’s high marks in Potions to her partner. It made sense in a way. Devon Pearce was a Slytherin Prefect whose quiet, intense nature jived perfectly with Potions work.

It just so happened that Potions was already one of Ginny’s best subjects when they were paired together at the start of third year.

“Twenty seconds,” Devon said, and Ginny neatly placed the vials in the wooden holder and labeled them. They’d long ago discovered that Devon’s perfectly steady hands made the transfer of liquid easier, and Ginny was better at correcting last minute problems with free hands.

“All set.”

On the second day of third-year Potions, Devon had been smarting from a heated fight with her then-best mate, one Olivia Flint who, besides being Marcus Flint’s horrid younger sister, was Ginny’s arch nemesis at Hogwarts.

In a turn of utmost defiance that would, unbeknownst to them, strangely bond the two girls together for years to come, Devon had forsaken her usual seat at the double with Olivia and took the seat next to Ginny. Inordinately pleased at the opportunity to hack off both Professor Snape and Olivia at the same time—two birds, and all

that—Ginny played along like a champ. But then, something happened.

The first week passed, and the next, and still they sat next to each other.

When they had come back from the Christmas holiday that year, Ginny had been unsure as to whether they would continue their partnership, but when she dared to sit next to Devon yet again, and Devon didn't move away, she smiled to herself and they had carried on ever since.

What was more, they had propelled each other to do better, becoming two of the three best students in their year (along with a Ravenclaw Ginny found not to be terribly objectionable, Constantine Cardenas). The two of them became an institution. When exam time came around, their classmates had flocked to study with them and it eventually morphed into somewhat of a tradition. Once word of it had spread to the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, their now biannual review sessions (before Christmas and before end of term exams in the spring) attracted a faithful following of 36 of the 38 students in their year.

Only Olivia and her new best friend (since Devon's third-year defection) Maxine Leyton did not deign to show their faces.

"Watch the steam," Ginny said absentmindedly.

Devon kept her eyes on the potion. "Will glass affect the—"

"I put salt in the vials," Ginny assured her. Devon nodded confidently and filled three vials, which Ginny let cool before bringing them up to the front of the class to turn in.

While Ginny's skills and humor had improved Devon's academic position, Devon had given Ginny something in return: on the rare occasion Ginny edged too close to losing her composure in front of Snape—when his remarks became especially personal, leaving the familiar territory of her hair, her family's poverty, and her personality, and jumping head-long into quiet references to her first year—Devon

would be there with a comment about the potion, the ingredients, the process, effectively distracting Ginny from being caught up in the memories and reminding her of where she was, that she had an ally sitting right there next to her.

Ginny wasn't sure how much Devon knew about what had actually occurred with Tom Riddle's diary, but she had gotten the impression that most of the older Slytherin students had a pretty good idea. They were all purebloods, as far as she knew, and all the pureblood families were related, the Slytherins more so than the others. Thus, most of them also had ties, intimate or somewhat removed, to the Death Eaters.

The Pearces, much like the Ramseys, had never been involved with the Dark Arts, at least back to the days of Grindelwald. But Ginny was well aware that Devon's aunt by marriage had been a Black, a cousin of Sirius. She had seen their names on the Black family tapestry.

"I need to review the effects of prolonged water exposure and lunar cycles," Devon said when Ginny returned from handing in their work. The Slytherin was cleaning her cauldron while the other pairs of students were still scrambling to finish their potions.

"I have a little saying to help remember the effects of the stages," Ginny said. "Forfeiting the Queen Was a Maneuver He Never Ignored."

"I can't wait for you to unravel that," Devon said sardonically.

"Don't worry. You'll be grateful when the exam's in front of you."

"No doubt," Devon said, sharpening her knives with a spell, wrapping them in cloth, and tucking them away in her kit. "Your other 'little sayings' were helpful, if weird. I'll see you Wednesday."

The rest of the class filtered out as Ginny cleaned her own space, packed away her things, relabeled her ingredients. Ginny appreciated precision.

"We'll see you in Transfiguration?" Kerney asked as she walked by.

"If you don't, Snape's killed me, and I want you to move on with your life as best you can," Ginny said, shutting the flap on her bag.

"I get her broom," Othello said happily, making Andy smile as her friends left her behind in the Potions classroom. She took a deep breath and turned to walk up to Snape's desk at the front of the room. Even as she stood next to him, he did not look up. Ginny rolled her eyes at his posturing.

"You wanted to see me, professor?"

He finished the sentence he was writing and looked up. "Sit, Miss Weasley."

It took all of her self-control to keep herself from disobeying out of spitefulness. She wasn't intimidated by his words or threats—Charlie had certainly thickened her skin in that regard—, and she wasn't about to follow him without question. Of course, there were still times when he could rattle her; the difference between Ginny at twelve and Ginny at fifteen was that she didn't show it. She sat, and waited for him to continue. He did, but not until he forced her to withstand his hateful scrutiny. She was proud of herself for every second that she was able to calmly return his stare.

"I was informed of your intention to take your Potions O.W.L. early," he began, finally. Ginny didn't dare answer, outside of the slightest nod. Her close observation over the years had taught her that the less students spoke, the less abrasive he tended to be. "You thought you were gifted enough to skip an entire year of my lessons?"

Well, there was really no good way to answer that question, was there?

"Professor Dumbledore told me that wouldn't be possible, sir," she said, sidestepping the issue.

"Yes," he sneered. "Instead, I am supposed to take time out of my own schedule to approve an independent project."

She waited.

"I won't," he said. Ginny's eyes snapped to his. "Instead, I will give you an assignment of my choosing. Various potions that will be required for a larger project being conducted by an older, more capable student. If I find your work acceptable, you will join his project as an assistant."

Ginny suppressed her irritation. An angry response would serve no purpose.

"You will be given no allowances," Snape said.

"I understand, sir."

Here he paused and his scrutiny of her intensified. He had almost a trace of concern at her calm, repetitive responses. He must think her to be a puzzle after dealing with all her brothers. She was neither as loud nor as vulgar as Ron and the twins, but she wasn't obsessed with pleasing him like Percy, either.

Snape turned toward the shelves, showing no sign or responding, and Ginny glanced at the clock on the wall. She rose from her seat and addressed his back.

"If there's nothing else, sir, I ought to go to Defense class."

"Expect your first assignment by Friday," he said dismissively. She turned to leave, barely slowing down to grab her bag on her way out.

Once in the Defense classroom, Ginny slid up to where Kerney and Nadine were standing in the third row. Kerney was leaning against a desk, but Nadine had her arms crossed over her chest glaring across the room. The professor hadn't arrived yet.

"What's going on?" Ginny asked, taking in the picture of Andy McGrath looking uncomfortable while two Ravenclaws were encroaching on his personal space.

"Andy's being a manwhore," Nadine said bitterly.



“Oh, yes. Practically throwing himself at them,” Kerney said without a trace of sarcasm, though she was giving Nadine a particularly annoyed look. The dark-haired beauty didn’t seem to notice as her jaw clenched when one of the girls put her hand on Andy’s arm.

“Guess they thought they should strike early this year,” Ginny said, tilting her head to take in the scene.

“They aren’t even in this class,” Nadine said. “They just dropped in to say hi to dear Andy.”

“And you’re just going to let him be molested?” Ginny asked, turning to Nadine.

“He doesn’t look like he’s trying very hard to make them leave,” Nadine said, still glaring. But from the way Andy kept glancing at Nadine and then seeming even more flustered, Ginny thought she was missing something and decided to step in herself.

Ginny walked over to them in five strides and looped her arm through Andy’s, leaning her head on his shoulder like little Nadia Ryan had done on the train. He jumped at the contact, and one of the girls glared while the other looked amused by the interruption.

“Andy? Will you be my partner today?” Ginny asked, her voice dripping sweetness.

The good-looking boy looked confused. “I’m always your partner.”

“Aw thanks!” Ginny beamed and then pretended to notice the two other girls. “Oh. Hi Charlotte! Hi Talia! How was your holiday?”

Charlotte smiled. “Good.”

“Fine,” Talia said, shoulders straightening as she turned back to Andy. “I’ll see you in Charms, Andy.”

“Yeah,” Charlotte said, touching his arm one more time. Ginny could practically feel Nadine’s glare. “See you then.”

"All right," Andy said, smiling back as if completely unaware that he was encouraging the girls. Then he turned to Ginny. "I'll go set up the desk."

He walked back to Kerney and Nadine, and Charlotte looked ready to go too, but Talia leaned in to whisper, "You think I don't know what you're trying to do?"

Ginny shrugged. "Hang out with my best mate?"

"He's open game, Ginny," Talia said.

"Come on, Talia. Let's go," Charlotte said, and they left together. Ginny shook her head. Charlotte had been after Andy since third year, and it hadn't worked yet, but he kept treating her well, and she kept thinking that meant something.

Ginny rejoined Kerney, Nadine, and Andy in the middle of a fight between the last two.

"Recap," Ginny whispered to Kerney.

"She accused him of drooling. He called her delusional. She said he was an arse. And then I tuned them out in favor of deciding how I could shut them up without being given a detention," Kerney said, calmly twirling her wand.

While Ginny found her two friends amusing, Kerney was past all stages of amusement, and had begun to just hex them whenever they started in on each other. Nadine had already been to see Madam Pomfrey on account of the disgusting mole Kerney had installed on her face the day before after Nadine had leaned over her to shout something not very lady-like at Andy during Herbology.

Luckily, Ginny had never been on the receiving end of that particular punishment. She knew not to get on Kerney's nerves; in fact, she wasn't altogether sure how everyone else managed to get caught in her friend's wrath. Kerney was not what one would call a high-strung

or particularly needy friend—which was probably why Ginny and she were so close.

“We’ll just keep them separated a bit more than usual,” Ginny said, nodding at Andy.

“Fine with me,” Kerney said, taking the seat next to Nadine at her table. They had an arrangement carefully chiseled and codified after the first three years of Hogwarts proved that under no circumstances could Nadine and Andy work together. Or, at least, work together without something dreadful happening to one of them.

“Maybe I should have let one of those girls trick Andy into dating them,” Ginny said. “Might be good for both him and Nadine.”

Ginny’s thoughts were interrupted as the most graceful woman she had ever seen emerged from the office in the rear of the classroom to walk through the rows of students hurriedly sliding into their seats. She walked as if she were floating.

If Weasleys were Slytherins, would we get metal rods implanted in our spines, too? Ginny wondered. Professor Wrightman had better posture than anyone she had ever laid eyes on. But the real kicker was, it didn’t look forced, either by tension, as Snape’s always did, or by virtue of having to train the body. Ginny remembered a brief stage when she was very young, where her mother had attempted to force good posture upon Ron and the twins. One could imagine how that turned out.

“As you heard at the Opening Feast, my name is Professor Wrightman, and this is O.W.L.-level Defense Against the Dark Arts,” she said in a clipped, posh accent.

As Professor Wrightman began to call the roll, Ginny noticed that her teacher would look up and catch the eye of each student after she called their names. Ginny wasn’t sure if she was imagining things, but thought she noticed the woman pause a little longer when her eyes landed on Andy. A few names later, her own was called.

“Ginevra Weasley,” Professor Wrightman said in a clear, articulate voice.

“Here,” Ginny responded promptly. She raised her hand slightly as the teacher grazed her eyes about the room to match a face with the name. “But everyone calls me Ginny,” she added once she had been spotted.

If she thought Professor Wrightman may have paused slightly on Andy, she knew that the woman was doing it for her. Ginny calmly continued to return the gaze of her teacher, determined not to break eye contact or in any other way show that she was rattled.

There was an almost imperceptible squint to her eyes, as if Professor Wrightman couldn’t quite make her out—but it was gone as fast as it had appeared, and the regal woman smoothly moved into teaching mode to begin their first real Defense lesson in more than a year, and it was just a review session with the students filling out a brief questionnaire and then answering questions.

“Miss Weasley, stay behind,” Professor Wrightman said as the class packed up their things to leave for lunch. Ginny nodded in response, turning back to her friends to find Andy and Kerney looking at her expectedly.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” Ginny said. Kerney nodded, and Andy just sighed, resigned to waiting her out. After the three Gryffindors departed, Ginny left her half-packed school things and made her way into the back office where Professor Wrightman had gone.

“You wanted to see me, professor?” Ginny said by way of announcing her presence. Wrightman looked up from the parchment she had been reading and motioned for Ginny to sit down in the visitor’s chair. She did, feeling the strange urge to straighten her back and cross her ankles in the manner of her teacher.

“You asked and were denied the right to take your Defense O.W.L. early,” she said. Cuts right to the chase, doesn’t she?

"Yes, ma'am," Ginny replied dutifully. Professor Wrightman nodded, though if her airtight demeanor had been inclined to give anything away, Ginny thought she might have been judgmental. Her professor resumed the scrutiny she had initiated in calling the roll.

"Did you want to take other exams as well?"

"Potions and Transfiguration," Ginny supplied, and Wrightman nodded.

"So mine is not the only class that you feel is a waste of your time," Wrightman noted. Ginny nearly flinched, though the professor's tone was still mild.

"It's not that I thought your class was a waste of time. Nor were Transfiguration or Potions. But taking the exams early would have let me study the subjects in more depth." Ginny paused to silently gauge her teacher's reaction; Wrightman did not look particularly impressed.

"On your own," the professor said, voice still clipped and judgmental.

Ginny forcefully stopped herself from fidgeting. "I have a few friends who would have helped me."

"You think little of my position here."

Ginny shook her head. "I don't know you, professor, but we've had a string of bad professors, and I didn't want my proficiency to be dependent on another person like Umbridge who refused to actually teach us."

"So you taught yourself."

"I had help," Ginny said, thinking of the D.A.

"And what have you managed to accomplish on your own?" Wrightman asked. She was a very small woman, but her sheer presence made her seem larger than life.

"A corporeal Patronus," Ginny blurted out.

“What form does it take?”

“A stag,” Ginny said. At least Professor Wrightman couldn’t possibly know Harry’s Patronus form just yet.

“And who taught you the spell?”

“My friend Harry at first, but then another friend, Remus, helped me make it corporeal.”

“Remus?” The professor was staring intently at her. “Is he one of your housemates?”

“No. Actually, he taught Defense here my second year. He was the best professor we’ve ever had.”

For the first time, Gertrude Wrightman seemed to react.

“Are you talking about Remus Lupin?” Professor Wrightman asked, as close to surprised as Ginny thought possible. Which, compared to most people, wasn’t very much.

Ginny smiled again. “Yes, Remus Lupin.”

“The werewolf?” she asked. Ginny’s temper flared.

“Yes. Is that a problem?” Ginny snapped.

And there it was again, emotional-Ginny rearing her ugly head, and getting regular-Ginny into trouble again. She calmed down a bit and didn’t take time to be surprised at her teacher’s reaction, which was less one of anger than it was annoyance.

“I’m sorry, professor. I didn’t mean to snap at you. But he’s a close family friend, and if he hadn’t been forced to resign by other people’s prejudice, we would have had him as a Defense teacher the last two years instead of two psychopaths and then—” we could have gone to him and we would have known that Sirius was safe. And Sirius might still be alive.

Deep breath. Luckily she had stopped herself before saying anything she shouldn't. Seeing that Ginny was becoming distressed, Professor Wrightman cut in, changing the subject.

"I will not assign you an independent project until I assess your current progress," Wrightman said. "You will follow the curriculum outlined in today's lesson, and we will discuss the matter again in one month."

Twice in a single day, Ginny wanted to yell a professor, but managed to hold back. Fine. Fine. Let her believe Ginny wasn't qualified or smart enough. Ginny would prove her wrong, and in the meantime, this professor was being mentally erased from Ginny's People Who Matter list.

"All right." Ginny sat back in her seat, thinking briefly that good posture could sod off.

"I will let you know the date," Wrightman said, nodding that the unproductive meeting was over. She picked up her things—shoving her books in quickly—and made her way to the Great Hall.

Everyone else was well into their lunch by now, and Ginny sat between Andy and Kerney with a huff. If she'd known asking to take the O.W.L. exams early would cause such a fuss, she wouldn't have done it. Well, that was a lie. Most likely, she still would have asked, but that didn't lessen her irritation with the way she'd been treated by Snape and Wrightman.

"Did your third secretive meeting with a professor not go as well as the first two?" Kerney asked, taking a bite of her salad.

"It was like a progression from decent to irritating to I-want-to-hex-someone," Ginny said, sliding the plate of bread toward her.

"That's vague," Kerney pointed out.

Andy and Nadine were sitting across from them, and he was actively trying to keep her from the apple slices, though Ginny didn't want to ask why.

"Well, I don't feel like telling the whole house," Ginny said a bit more quietly to avoid the attention of Othello or Collin.

"Then why don't we eat in the Kitchens," Kerney suggested, resting her fork on her plate.

The brown-haired girl looked patiently at Ginny as if she knew she could out-wait her friend by hours. Sadly, Ginny knew it was true; she may have been many things, but patient was never one of them.

"All right," Ginny said. "Maybe I'll be able to eat some banana bread down there."

Kerney rose from her seat. Ginny did likewise.

"Where are you going?" Andy asked, catching the movement. Kerney looked to Ginny.

"Kitchens," she said, looking at both him and Nadine. "Want to come?"

Nadine turned to Andy, who glanced only briefly at Ginny before standing. That seemed to be enough for Nadine, who joined the threesome as they left the Great Hall and slipped through the corridors toward the portrait of the bowl of fruit. None of them spoke until Ginny tickled the pear.

"What are you doing?" Nadine asked, finally voicing the perplexity that had been all over her face since she'd come out of the Great Hall.

"Getting some lunch," Ginny answered as the painting sprang open.

"It's the Kitchens," Andy said, surprised. He and Nadine had never come down here.

"Can anyone come down here?"



"Well, it is breaking half a dozen rules," Kerney said evenly as they all filed into the kitchens.

"Miss Wheezy?" Dobby said as he trotted into view.

"Hi, Dobby," she said, smiling. Kerney looked amused at their familiarity. Andy and Nadine had clearly never seen a house elf quite like Dobby.

"Oh, Dobby is so happy that Miss Wheezy has come with her friends to see him in the kitchens!"

"Of course I came to see you." She turned to her companions. "This is Andy, Kerney, and Nadine." She pointed to each one in turn. "They're in fifth year just like me."

When the elves had scurried off to get them some lunch under Dobby's direction, the four Gryffindors found seats and Ginny jumped right into explanation. She had a feeling that if she delayed until after they ate, or thought about it too long, she might chicken out. And she really didn't want to do that. Kerney and Andy's faces had become more serious (though still expectant) and Nadine just looked slightly uncertain about why exactly she was there.

"So you all must have some questions, huh?" Ginny began, pinching off a piece of bread and rolling it between her fingers.

"A few," Kerney said sardonically.

"Is this about why all our professors asked to speak with you?" Nadine asked, glancing at Andy for some sign from him. She looked unsure about whether she belonged. But Andy did something that Ginny had not been expecting: he supported her without mocking by taking her hand.

Nadine froze at the unexpected contact, but recovered quickly and relaxed slightly, a blush running up into her cheeks. When Andy turned back to look at Ginny, she answered.

"Yeah," Ginny said, squashing the bread between her fingers. "Something like that."

"You're not trying to switch houses, right?" Andy asked to lighten the mood. "The Quidditch team would revolt."

Ginny smiled at her friend. Kerney looked amused, and Nadine more relaxed.

"No. Nothing like that. I'm just going to work with some of the professors in my free time," Ginny said.

"Snape, McGonagall, and Wrightman?" Andy asked, surprised.

"Well, just McGonagall right now," Ginny said. "Wrightman said I needed to be evaluated, and Snape's just going to give me extra assignments for a while."

Ginny absently spun the spoon around her soup bowl.

"Cool," Andy said at length. Ginny grinned. It was sort of cool.

"Why?" Kerney asked in a quiet but resolute voice. The three other fifth years looked over at her, but her brown eyes locked on Ginny, who decided to be honest.

"Because I asked to take my O.W.L.s early in those classes, and when the Ministry and Dumbledore decided that wasn't possible, I was told that I could pursue the subjects further in this way," Ginny said, kicking the ground with her shoe. She tried to sound positive about it; She'd found out a long time ago that a good attitude could do wonders.

But while she was trying to reform her own thoughts, her three friends' mouths dropped open in shock.

"You wanted to take the O.W.L.s early?" Andy asked.

"Just those three," she said, but he kept giving her an incredulous look.

Nadine shook her head. "Our schedules are so rigid, though. How could you—"

"I can't," Ginny said. "For that reason and more."

"Why?" Kerney asked, intense and interested. "Why would you ask to do that?"

Ginny tapped her fork against the table restlessly. She hadn't eaten a thing, but couldn't imagine doing so now. She considered lying for a moment. It would be easy to brush aside the real reasons and just tell them she wanted to outshine her brothers, make her own path at Hogwarts, leave a legend all her own. But Kerney and Andy and Nadine were looking at her patiently and expectantly, trusting her. She just couldn't ignore that.

"Voldemort's back," Ginny said, Tom's face dancing in her mind and making her feel queasy, but also strengthening her resolve. "He's back, and I am going to help fight him."

She had never told Kerney and Andy what had happened first year, not all of it, but they had pieced together little comments from Ginny over the years. They knew enough to know that she wanted to hurt him. Even if that weren't the case, the battle at the Ministry had linked her to the resistance and Harry Potter forever.

"You're one girl," Nadine said haltingly. "I know you know Harry Potter well, but that doesn't mean that you have to fight You-Know-Who."

"I want to," Ginny said, remembering the feeling of finally being free from Tom's control. She couldn't really explain her hesitancy in telling the whole story about that to her friends. She had come to terms with it, but she was still secretly ashamed of having been taken over by a foreign influence just because she'd felt a little lonely her first year, no matter how well she pretended otherwise.

"And you thought taking your O.W.L.s early would help you prepare," Andy said. "That makes sense."

Ginny nodded.

"You think the fight's going to come much sooner than everyone is saying," Kerney said, and Nadine's grip on Andy's hand tightened when Ginny nodded.

"And that's why you joined that club of Harry's last year," Kerney said. "You don't want to be vulnerable."

Ginny had never put it in exactly those terms, but it was as good an explanation as any other.

"It helps that she's brilliant at school," Andy said, watching the redhead.

"Not brilliant enough to take the exams early, though," Ginny said. "So I'm going to work with the professors this term during my free time, but I don't really want everyone knowing about it."

"We won't tell anyone," Kerney said, rolling her eyes as if the very suggestion was ridiculous. Andy and Nadine nodded their agreement.

"Well, if you're all up to keeping a few more secrets," Ginny said, forcing her voice to sound much lighter as she steered the conversation away from herself. "Then I'd like you all to come to the Defense Club meetings this year."

Kerney's eyes lit up. "Definitely."

"Of course," Andy agreed.

Nadine watched Andy for a moment as she decided, then gave a small nod. "Alright."

Ginny smiled. "Great. The first meeting is in a couple of days."

They left the Kitchens a short while later, four friends bound together with secrets and plans, but Ginny still felt a bit guilty about having hidden her deepest secrets from them. She wanted to tell them about first year. She really did. But the words seemed impossible.

Four years was a long time to keep a secret. Long enough for it to have become a habit.

She went through her remaining lessons in a bit of a haze, and when she walked into the common room that night, it was mostly empty, quiet and dark save for a few pockets of students playing games and enjoying their free time before the work really began to pile up. It was her brother Ron standing in the corner who caught her eye as he waved to her.

Ginny made her way over and wrapped her arms around his stomach, resting her head against his shoulder. He reacted instinctively, holding her with his left arm. They stood like that for a moment.

"You okay?" he asked, clearly perplexed.

She nodded. "Yeah. I just needed a hug."

"Don't go all sappy on me, Gin. I'm a bloke," he said, squeezing her shoulder. She chuckled, closing her eyes for a moment. He knew about first year. Knew without ever having to be told. And still he loved her. She wondered if he knew how much that meant to her.

"Thanks," she said before making her way up to her bed.

A couple of weeks later, Ginny sat alone in a large, soft chair to the side of the common room stretching. While schoolwork should have been a top priority, the Quidditch team had just finished their first practice of the year, and Ginny was trying to keep her body loose, even as she ran through the new exercises in her mind again. Harry had been carrying out his duties as captain with gusto, determined to make up for his absence the previous year. Ginny was thrilled about it. Challenging flying was flying at its best.

The new team roster had been posted at midnight the night before, following several hours of discussion between Harry, Ron, and Katie Bell. Ginny doubted that any of them had done any schoolwork.

Ginny had been named a Chaser, thanks to her amazing broom and talent. The third Chaser spot had been filled surprisingly by Betsy Moran, Duncan's third-year sister and, perhaps more significantly, daughter of the Moran from the Irish National Team. She badly needed experience, but it was quite obvious that she had inherited her mother's natural talent.

Much to Ginny's delight, Stephen McGrath had blown away the competition for the Beater spots, and would be partnering a reasonably improved Jack Sloper. Andrew Kirke had not tried out again.

"I can't move," Stevie said loudly, yanking his hand away from Nadia as she tried to pry him off the couch where he'd collapsed after returning from practice.

"You're being lazy," Nadia said, stamping her foot. Ginny thought this might be the first time Stevie had denied his best mate anything.

"I hurt," he said, lifting his left arm and letting it fall back down.

"Don't harass my Beater," Harry said, walking by. Nadia's face turned red, but Stevie sat up straighter, beaming. He was on the Quidditch team, and that seemed to be all that mattered.

"I think you made Stevie's entire day," Ginny said to Harry as he came close. The dark-haired wizard turned to look back at the third year who was so clearly pleased.

"He played well in practice," Harry said, sitting on the footstool in front of Ginny.

"He'll play even better when he grows up a bit more," Ginny said.

Harry nodded. "But your brothers were in third year when I started playing with them, and their age didn't matter."

"They were two when they started practices hitting things with sticks, though," Ginny said, stretching. "Mum used to give them spoons and a couple of pots with Muffling Charms on them to play with. Their first

accidental magic was amplifying the pounding and nearly making my mum go deaf.” It was an old family story that was often retold at family dinners.

“What was yours?” Harry asked, leaning on his knees.

Ginny grinned. “I Banished Bill to the garden when he kept telling me I couldn’t have a biscuit. He was babysitting.”

“I once Banished myself onto a roof,” Harry said ruefully. “Couldn’t manage to bring myself down again, though. The principal had to find a ladder.”

“Sounds fun.”

“It was. Until my aunt and uncle heard about it. Then it was just a mess,” he said, yawning. How he was still awake, Ginny didn’t know.

With the Quidditch season underway, sixth year classes, sporadic meetings with Dumbledore, and the commencement of D.A. meetings twice a week, Harry was so busy that it was almost sickening. Of course, Ginny would have had more sympathy if she didn’t have meetings with McGonagall twice a week, extra potions to make for Snape, and just as many D.A. and Quidditch practices as he did. Being in charge of the last two, however, was probably taking its toll on him, though you’d never know it. Harry never looked quite right unless he had at least a dozen very important things to do.

“Where are Ron and Hermione?” Ginny asked, glancing around.

“Ron has patrol, and Hermione’s working on an Ancient Runes project,” Harry recited.

“Patrol after practice?” Ginny asked. “That’s rough.”

“Amelia switched their schedule,” Harry said, shrugging. Yep, it was official: Ginny was absolutely thrilled to have been overlooked for that particular honor. Being a Prefect would have been awful.

“So you’re stuck with me,” Ginny said. “Your last friend.”

"I have Neville," Harry said, practically pouting, which made Ginny grin.

"You wish," she said. "Neville is working with Sprout right now. You have no other options."

Harry smiled the smile that made Ginny's heart skip beats. "I'm okay with that."

She didn't seem to have enough air in her lungs to produce words.

Luckily, Harry spoke again. "Stevie's doing well in the D.A. too, isn't he?"

Focus, she thought to herself. Focus. Not on his mouth. Or eyes. On conversation. Conversation.

"Yeah," she choked out. "All the new people are."

"Your friends are easy to work with," Harry said, glancing over at Andy and Nadine playing a game of chess. Ginny smiled.

"Better than Michael?"

"Better than Zacharias, even," he teased.

"Well, then, I'm glad," Ginny said.

"How come you don't bring Devon to the D.A. meetings?" Harry asked. He, Ginny, and Devon had come together four times already this year to study Potions. Knowing that she worked best in Potions when she had her partner, Ginny had succeeded in convincing Devon to join them in their lessons two nights a week.

Harry actually seemed to take quite well to the Slytherin's treatment of him; she didn't seem to care one bit that he was the Boy-Who-Lived, and her natural, casual behavior around him only sped up his acceptance of her.



"She's a Slytherin," Ginny said, shrugging.

"She should still learn to fight," Harry said, making Ginny blink at him. Since when was he so open-minded?

"Professor Wrightman's Defense class is teaching her pretty well," Ginny said, and it was true. No matter that the woman had irritated her on the first day of class, there was no denying that Professor Wrightman had exceptionally high standards for all of her students. She taught them hexes, counter-hexes, how to anticipate non-verbal attacks, how to adjust their shields to absorb certain types of magic, and that was all within these first two weeks of class.

"Wrightman's a good professor."

"You're only saying that because you're her star pupil," Ginny said teasingly.

Everyone in the school had heard about the N.E.W.T. Defense classes. Harry had beaten everyone else in a tournament-style dueling exchange in the first week. It had been to assess everyone's skills, and Harry had simply destroyed the competition. He'd also blocked hexes from the professor herself and managed to convert the energy from a hex into a shield even though everyone knew that was a seventh year lesson. Needless to say, the school's interest in Harry had only increased.

"Still," Harry said, ignoring her praise, "Devon would be welcome at the D.A."

Ginny didn't know about that, thinking of Ron and Colin, but shrugged. "I don't know her very well. Just as a Potions partner."

That seemed to make sense to Harry, who accepted it with a nod, only to change the subject as his eyes landed on all of the stuff on the floor. "What's all this for?"

"Burning," Ginny said. Her books and parchment were on the ground surrounding her chair, waiting for her to care enough about them to pick them up. Yet the only thing she really cared about was learning

how to Vanish a fractured bone piece while healing the remaining bone. But that was just her extra credit project with McGonagall, to be studied only after she'd done the rest of her work. And while she had understood all of the readings that were due for the next week, she could not motivate herself to do the menial task of writing an essay about those subjects.

"You don't like schoolwork much, do you?" Harry asked.

"I don't like mindless work," Ginny corrected. She enjoyed the actual spells and potions. She hated pretending like knowing the history of a spell mattered. It was probably why History was her worst subject.

Harry nodded. "The practical portion of the O.W.L.s saved me."

"I wouldn't know," she said, putting her hair up in a ponytail.

Picking up on her tone, he tried to shift the subject. "How are your extra projects going?"

"Fine. I've finished one potion and am awaiting my next assignment." It had been two weeks since the start of term, and Ginny was already bored with the in-class assignments. She'd read far ahead in anticipation of taking the O.W.L.s early, and when that hadn't panned out, she'd read even further ahead as if to spite the people who thought she couldn't pass them. All that meant was that now she was even less inclined to writing the tedious essays she never managed to get perfects on. She always failed to explain a basic step in her essays—the parts that were so instinctive and necessary that Ginny thought little of them—and her professors always thought she'd forgotten those things. It was a vicious cycle.

"Don't fail anything or McGonagall will take you off the team," Harry said, standing.

"She will not," Ginny said. "She loves Quidditch entirely too much."

"Probably. But don't chance it," he said.

"I won't," she said, looking glumly at all of the books.

“Good.” He yawned. “And now I have to go to sleep.”

“You look like you need it, you old man,” Ginny said with a teasing smile.

“What’s that? Couldn’t hear you,” Harry said, tapping his ear. “Bad hearing, you know.”

He disappeared up the stairs to the boys’ rooms. Ginny sighed happily, only to have that feeling dissipate as she looked back over the mounds of work that she had to do. Making an executive decision to deal with the consequences, Ginny packed up all her things and went upstairs to sleep in her soft pajamas and warm bed.

She fell asleep almost the instant her head touched the pillow.

Ginny crept down the stairs of Grimmauld Place. It was not an unfamiliar action, despite the fact that the house was dark and no one else seemed to be awake. Bored and irritated that Ron and Hermione had spent most of their break in hushed conferences, Ginny had finished her homework, hung out with the twins, and was now sneaking down to the kitchen to steal the last piece of her mum’s famous cherry pie.

But just as she stepped into the kitchen, she jumped in surprise.

“Sirius?” she asked, trying to calm her beating heart.

He looked over at her with his tired eyes. “Hello Ginny.”

Sometimes Ginny found it rather hard to believe that this man had once been as exuberant and mischievous as the twins. Now there was a darkness in him, a dullness in his eyes, that he didn’t even seem to know existed. Sometimes it lessened, like when Remus or Harry was around, but other times—like now—he looked like half a man. She selfishly hoped that would never happen to her brothers.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he asked.

She grabbed the tin from the counter. "Wanted some more dessert."

He grinned. "I finished the pie."

She yanked off the lid, and looked down. Yes, the pie was gone. Darn. "Well, I'll have to have something else."

There were still a lot of sweets around the kitchen, and she found a biscuit and made her way over to join him at the kitchen table, a couple seats away.

"What's all this?" she asked. There appeared to be a collection of photos and albums on the coffee table in front of him.

"Remus found these in a box he had," Sirius said. "He's a packrat."

Ginny tried to reconcile that information with the professor she knew, and couldn't. Instead, she turned to the photos.

One glance at the pictures on the top of the pile startled her, as they appeared at first to be of Sirius and Harry. But a few additional seconds of examination quickly allowed her to see that the young man in the first picture had crisp blue eyes (quite unlike Sirius' stormy gray ones) and a slightly shorter, somewhat stockier build than the man before her.

But it was the other photo with the boy who looked so similar to Harry that kept her attention. The boy in the picture had on what were quite obviously Gryffindor Quidditch robes, only they were not the same style as any she had seen her brothers wear.

It wasn't the absence of a lightning bolt scar that told her he must be James Potter, but a combination of smaller details that made the picture appear to her as though someone had tried to paint a portrait of Harry but had messed up on some of his features. It was like a not-quite-right Harry Potter. Rich, twinkling hazel eyes stared back at her instead of the bright, uneasy green ones she knew so well. The boy's jaw was more square, nose a bit wider, and he was taller. Clearly a good-looking bloke, his cocky grin made him even more attractive.

"Is this the Quidditch team?" Ginny asked as James Potter in the picture tossed a Quaffle to someone outside the photo.

Sirius glanced over and nodded. "Yep."

There were two girls standing next to James. One was a good deal shorter than Harry's father, with dark blonde hair tied back in little pigtails and a laughing smile. The other girl looked taller and a little more reserved, and it was obvious that the first girl was better friends with James. Both were in the same Quidditch robes as Harry's dad. She turned to Sirius.

"Who are the girls?" she asked.

"Tracy and Nancy," he replied, pointing first to the short girl then the tall one. "Nancy was captain our sixth year."

"Were they any good?" She could help but ask.

He nodded. "We didn't win that year, I don't think. But yeah, they were good."

"Harry really does look like his dad, doesn't he?" she asked, though it was hard to tell whether the question was rhetorical or not.

"Yeah. He does," Sirius replied. Her eyes strayed back to the first picture.

"Is that your brother?" She saw Sirius's eyes harden from sadness to bitterness, but his voice remained even. She'd seen the brother listed on the family tree, but Sirius had never mentioned him except to say he died. He had been a Death Eater. Mad-eye told her.

"Yes. Regulus."

Ginny took one of the pictures in each hand. "They look like someone set out to take pictures of you and Harry, but messed up in spots."

"Or the other way around," Sirius said, considering the picture.

Ginny went back to the Quidditch picture. "But Harry did inherit his dad's flying skills, I heard."

"The Potters were always good at flying. Even Lily," Sirius said. "But it fits, Harry being a Seeker. James was flashy, scoring loads of goals, the center of attention most of the game. But Harry? He's quiet the whole game, flying out of sight, until he comes through at the last second to end the game. The Seekers are the lynchpin, the key to everything; Chasers just set the stage." Sirius trailed off a bit at the end, and the slightly faraway look on his face, the sadness (but not pity) that crept across it, gave Ginny the feeling that he wasn't talking about Quidditch anymore.

"You were lucky," Ginny blurted out, realizing how terrible it sounded only after it was out. But Sirius didn't notice.

"Course I was," Sirius said casually, shaking himself out of his mood instantly. "I knew James and Lily Potter. I was damned lucky."

Her heart clenched. "And Harry loves you. That sounds like a pretty good deal to me."

Sirius stared at her for a long time. She couldn't really know that if he had been a younger man, one who hadn't lost his best friend and freedom in a single night, he'd have teased her mercilessly, laughed and harassed her. Made her adore him for his enthusiasm just as he infuriated her with his teasing.

But he was thirty-seven years old now, and Ginny Weasley wasn't Lily Evans. It was a new generation, and he didn't know quite who he was anymore, except that somewhere along the line, his life had gone completely off course.

Ignoring his scrutiny, she began to look through more of the photos on the small table. A group picture caught her eye. Decorations in the background hinted that the photo had been taken on Halloween, by the looks of it, only a few months after Harry was born. He was so small.

Harry's dad was showing him off proudly to the camera, as a lovely young woman with red hair—the elusive Lily, presumably—smiled from his side. Remus was there, and Sirius stood on the other side of Lily with his arm around her shoulders. Ginny noticed that Lily kept trying to shake Sirius off, only to have him laugh. She joined in and wrapped her arms around his waist briefly, which made him release her. She smirked and moved away, only to have him wrap an arm around her shoulders again.

At the far left, on the other side of Remus, stood a shorter, chubbier young man, who could only be the infamous Peter Pettigrew. She wondered for a moment if he'd already begun his betrayal of his friends when the picture was taken, but then the people standing to the right of Sirius distracted her.

“Who are they?” Ginny asked, pointing to another family of three, though the infant looked slightly smaller than baby Harry. The parents were both tall and had blonde hair. The man was handsome and kind-looking, and in a very familiar way. She wondered where she possibly could have seen his face before. His dull blue eyes radiated contentedness. And his wife beamed alternately at him, the baby, and the camera. She would occasionally say something (though Ginny had no way of knowing what), and Lily and the father of the baby Ginny didn't know to chuckle.

“Friends of Lily's,” Sirius said, twisting to look at the photo. “I didn't know them well, but I heard the woman died some years ago.”

“Were they related to these two?” she asked, pointing to the final two people in the picture: a pair of blokes who looked like they were either fresh out of Hogwarts, or in their last year. Ginny thought she wouldn't mind being asked to Hogsmeade by a bloke who looked like either of them.

“Yes. Chad and Will,” Sirius said, finger lingering on the one with dark hair. “He's the head of the Caldwell family now.”

The Caldwells were an Old Family, Ginny knew, but she could bring herself to ask anything about the bloke because of all the people in the photo, the one that drew her attention was Lily, Harry's mum. She

was a bit of a mystery. Everyone knew about James Potter, of whom Harry was the spitting image, the Head Boy, the Quidditch player, the Marauder, Sirius Black's best mate. But from what Sirius said, it sounded like Harry wasn't a thing like him outside of his looks.

"What was Harry's mum like?" she asked. Sirius smiled, his whole face lighting up.

"Brilliant. And Funny. A good friend. But also thick. She never believed that she was special, and she was forever saying that she wasn't a leader, but when the attacks started, she was always right beside James and me on the front line, ordering people to run while she cast a bloody shield. Probably the only girl I knew who was strong enough for James." His entire demeanor was proud, and Ginny suspected it wouldn't have been easy to convince someone like Sirius that a girl was good enough for his best mate.

"Sounds pretty special to me."

"Harry reminds me of her. Defiant. Stubborn. And he has that same thing both of them did, that spark." He tapped the photo against the table a couple of times. "People became stronger around them, around James and Lily. Stronger and better. People saw them and thought they could be better, too." He paused and tossed the photo down. "Even when that was impossible."

Just then, the dream shifted, and Ginny found herself in the foyer of Grimmauld Place, still with Sirius, but joined by a real live version of Sirius's mum, as if the figure in the portrait had come to life. The horrible woman's voice was coaxing her in the same tones in which she had spoken to Ginny the night the painting had finally been silenced. But it was encouraging instead disparaging her.

"You could control him, you know," Mrs. Black whispered. "Keep him from leaving. Keep him safe."

Ginny suddenly knew that this was the night of the Department of Mysteries fight. "He can't go."



"But he will," Mrs. Black said smoothly. "He'll go to save his godson, and he'll die. He'll die if you let him do what he wants."

"I can't stop him," Ginny said, completely submerged in the dream. She wanted to cry, Sirius was going to die.

"You can," Mrs. Black said. "You're strong enough."

"He'll go no matter what I say," Ginny said, not caring that she was speaking to that vile woman, only knowing that before her sat a healthy Sirius Black who was going to throw his life away. Again. And Harry and Remus were going to suffer for it.

"You know the spell that could stop him," Mrs. Black said.

Imperio.

Ginny instinctively rejected the idea at first, though even considering it caused a small rush of adrenalin to shoot through her. But the jolt was enough to make her realize that there was something wrong with this scene.

"I broke your portrait," Ginny said, trying to orient herself. "You're silent now."

"Wandless magic is mind magic at its strongest," Mrs. Black said, grinning wickedly. "Using it on me bound us together. And now I'm here to guide you."

Ginny's clenched her jaw. "I don't want you to."

"You don't have a choice, seventh child."

"I always have a choice." Wasn't that what Dumbledore was always saying?

"You have a choice to save him. Make him save himself." Mrs. Black looked over at Sirius, and Ginny did too.

"That isn't right."

“Is it better to let my only remaining son die for no reason?”

“He made his choice.”

“Think of those who suffered for it.” Mrs. Black looked sadly at Ginny, who stared at Sirius. “It will feel good. You’ll be doing the right thing.”

Sirius said nothing, but looked at her from his seat on the stairs with pleading eyes, eyes begging her not to give in.

But, just as she had eventually done with Tom Riddle, Ginny lost her will to fight, picking her wand out of her pocket and slowly pointing it at him.

“Perfect, Ginevra. Such a perfect witch.” Mrs. Black smiled.

“I can’t let you die,” Ginny told the man.

A twist of her wand, and a strong pronunciation of “Imperio!” brought her in control of Sirius’s brain and body, and as she cast the spell and began to force her will on him, she felt a rush of power like nothing she had ever known.

She felt strong and untouchable, like she could take on Dumbledore and win. She wondered why a spell that created such a wonderful feeling could possibly be classified as “unforgivable.” Sirius began to fight the curse, leading Ginny to attempt a stronger cast.

“He’s fighting you,” Mrs. Black said quietly. “He must be stopped.”

This time, Ginny didn’t fight the advice. “Crucio!”

And the power was back, stronger than ever, but right as she was flicking her wand and about to strength the incantation, she happened to meet Sirius’s eyes again, briefly out from under the spell, and the utter sadness and regret in them tore Ginny from her sleep.

Ginny gasped as she awoke suddenly, drenched with sweat and breathing hard. She frantically looked around the room, trying to find

out where the dream ended and reality began. She scooted back against her headboard and wrapped her arms around her knees, breathing deeply and trying to push the dream completely from her mind.

But she just couldn't shake the feeling—the utter high she had felt in her dream when she'd let the curses fly. And she couldn't shake the eerie feeling of familiarity that had come with it. She could not ever recall feeling that way before—the rush of power, like a mix between flying at top speed on her broom and the moment right before she had silenced the painting at Grimmauld Place.

Except that this feeling was much stronger.

So much stronger that it scared her. She wondered why it did, when the feeling itself was so fantastic, and when there were so many other things that were darker, scarier, and more painful that didn't frighten her. She was certain that she'd never felt that way after casting a spell before.

And yet it felt familiar.

“No,” Ginny said aloud to herself. The sound of her own voice was a comfort, but she knew she could not go back to bed. Not now. Not yet. She was too wide awake, too shaken. So Ginny got up, grabbed one of Charlie's old jumpers. With one last look at Kerney and Nadine's sleeping forms, she crept quietly out of the room.

The fire was low in the common room, nearly burnt out. Putting on her brother's jumper, she curled up on the couch in her usual manner, tucking her bare legs up near her wool-covered chest.

As she stared into the fire, she began to feel a piercing coldness gradually expanding inside her. It was hardly noticeable at first, but as it grew in intensity, Ginny froze, held her breath, and quickly started trying to think of how she could possibly describe what she was feeling. As strange as the feelings in her dreams had been, the coldness that was escalating in her now felt almost as if it was an aftertaste of them. Like it was part two or a continuation of the earlier, much more pleasant sensations.

She briefly remembered the exhaustion she'd felt the morning after she destroyed the portrait of Mrs. Black, but this was completely different. Rather than drained or exhausted, she actually felt bolstered in magical strength, despite the discomfort of the cold.

Her musings were interrupted as a stab of sharp, ice-cold pain shot up through her abdomen, feeling as though it pierced her heart. The pain was completely debilitating.

Her body, usually so warm, soft, and full of life, was crumpled in the fetal position on the couch. It felt as if she had been stabbed by a dozen invisible daggers, and it was all she could do to stifle her screams by pressing her mouth against the couch cushions.

When it finally subsided, Ginny lay stunned on the couch, limp like a rag doll.

What the hell had just happened?

As she stood up, a wave of exhaustion overcame her, and she had to hang on to the arm of the couch to keep from falling. Walking seemed an impossible feat, the dormitory door was too far away and she felt like she was going to pass out at any moment.

But all her thoughts were jarred once more as a second wave of coldness overtook her and the same frozen pain pierced through her heart again, nearly causing her to shriek. But the pain lasted for a shorter time, less debilitating. Less awful. Barely.

Because now that she had felt it again, she knew why it had felt familiar. It was the cold that she remembered, the icy feeling of being dunked under water that she had always associated with her first year, with Tom.

She closed her eyes and calmed herself down until she was able to stumble over to the girls' stair, where she slumped down on the first one, leaning against the wall and trying to catch her breath. She didn't want to be in the common room if she had another round of pain—anyone could come downstairs and see her.

Was this because of the dream? Was this just another dream itself? The pain seemed to suggest that it wasn't, but what the hell else could it be?

When she got back to her bed, she curled up into a ball on her mattress, hugging her pillow to her chest. Please, let this end.

It felt like she never actually went back to sleep. Instead, it seemed like she had stared at her curtains the whole night, but suddenly she was opening her eyes, and so she must have fallen asleep.

She dressed and ran through her morning routine quickly, trying to forget the dream and pain. Maybe she had imagined it.

But she knew she hadn't.

Once again, Ginny wished that she were better at self-delusion. Then again, that was what had led her to ignore the trouble with the diary for so long, so maybe not.

"Hey, Ginny. You only just wake up?" Colin asked as she walked into the common room, still plaiting her hair.

"Long night," she replied, heading for the portrait. Thank Merlin it was Saturday. No class to miss. Just a creepy dream to haunt her, and the memory of pain. Intellectually she knew that she should tell someone about it. At least about the icy pain. But she didn't want to. Despite everything, she was a fifteen year old girl, and she decided to wait to see if anything else happened. She would certainly go see someone if she had any blank spots in her memory. But until then, she would wait, though the words of Mrs. Black back during the holiday followed her everywhere: your soul in dark, Ginevra.

Two days later, conversation at breakfast was interrupted by the arrival of the Monday Daily Prophet. The roar of discussion prompted Ginny to turn to Kerney, her only friend who received the paper.

"What is it?" Ginny asked.

“Cornelius Fudge was replaced,” Kerney said, and Ginny gasped, leaning around to share her friend’s copy of the Prophet.

“He was removed from office?” Colin asked.

“Yeah,” Ginny muttered, scanning the article. There had been an all night session of the Wizengamut held in secret, and the result was unanimous: Fudge was out. A lot of students received mail from their parents that morning, though Ginny didn’t. Neither did Ron, she noticed when she glanced up the table at him. He and Hermione were alone that morning.

“Did you hear about the Minister?” Andy asked, joining them at the table.

“Yeah,” Ginny said, noticing that a lot of students kept glancing toward the Hufflepuff table, and Ginny looked over too despite guessing what they wanted to see.

Susan Bones’s aunt Amelia had been elected Minister of Magic, and Professor Sprout had joined the girl at her table where a dozen owls were fighting to deliver post. Ginny hoped people didn’t bother her too much. She was a really nice girl. Being a member of the D.A. would probably help her. They were all really protective of one another.

“Amelia Bones is a force to be reckoned with,” Othello said, eating a banana.

Kerney nodded. “My mother works with her. She’s strict and fair.”

But would that be enough in the coming war?

A quick glance at her watch had Ginny on her feet trying to arrange all her things.

“Where are you going?” Andy asked.

“Meeting with McGonagall,” she said quietly, scooping up her bag and trying to process the information from breakfast. Her parents normally wrote to her weekly, and one of her brothers did too, but she

decided to write to them tonight to see how they were. Her father must be dealing with a lot.

But first she had to talk to McGonagall, as she did every Monday. The walk to her office was quickly becoming a favorite of hers, as it meant a real challenge. And if there was anything she needed today, it was a challenge.

“Miss Weasley,” her head of house said in greeting.

“Hello professor,” Ginny replied. She didn’t ask if she’d heard the news about Fudge as it was clear she already had. McGonagall was especially close to Dumbledore, who was on the Wizengamut again, and had probably learned about it during the night.

“I read your essay,” McGonagall said, handing it back to her covered in little red marks. Ginny sighed. Someday she would have to give in to the inevitable and ask Hermione for writing tips. “Not your best.”

“Apparently not,” Ginny muttered, scanning the notes on the sides of the margins.

“Your progress with your project, however, has been exemplary,” McGonagall said. Unfortunately, Ginny couldn’t tell if the Transfiguration professor was complimenting her work ethic or reprimanding her lack of focus on her main schoolwork, so she said nothing. She wasn’t in the mood to talk, and McGonagall probably wasn’t either.

“Professor,” Ginny said, “can I ask you a question?”

“You already have, Miss Weasley.”

“Fudge was killed, wasn’t he?”

Minerva McGonagall’s face tightened. “He was replaced.”

Ginny shook her head. That felt like a half-truth. “An all night session of the Wizengamut, no statement from Fudge, and a replacement named unanimously? That doesn’t happen.”

McGonagall looked steadily at her with tired eyes. “No, it doesn’t, Miss Weasley.”

Things were going wrong out in the world, that was clear. But more than that, it was being hidden.

“I’d like to see your progress in the Adare spell,” McGonagall said, motioning for Ginny to step up to the desk where a bone lay cracked in half. It was time to let the subject go, the professor silently said.

“Sure,” Ginny said, trying to force back the jumble of thoughts clouding her mind. She focused on the two pieces, but kept thinking about Fudge’s replacement and the upheaval in the Ministry. Knowing she wouldn’t be able to concentrate properly, Ginny just cast the spell. “Adeus.”

Her hand seemed to move through the motions without thought, and suddenly the bone was stitched together, whole and seamless. McGonagall picked it up to examine it more closely. Despite Ginny’s initial surprise, she knew that it was a perfect.

“You’ve been studying,” McGonagall noted.

“I’m good at Transfiguration,” Ginny said. The words slipped out carelessly, and she was surprised at herself. But she knew it was true, too.

“You have a long way to go to work on human bones,” McGonagall said, but Ginny knew that the woman was impressed. Healing magic was N.E.W.T.-level work, and Ginny’s done well without even trying. The woman should be impressed. Maybe soon she’d realize that Ginny had been right to want to take her O.W.L.s early.

A week passed, and autumn crept in upon the castle. It was Ginny’s favorite season: changing leaves, Quidditch games, perfect weather. Flying in the cool felt like paradise, and she often found herself out on the pitch when studying, making potions, working with McGonagall, and doing school work were on the brink of driving her crazy. She left



all that stress and work behind when she kicked off the ground and slew lazy circles around the pitch.

It was only when she landed that she remembered the to-do list she never managed to complete.

“You’re going to wear yourself out,” Kerney said, leaning against the broom shed.

“I wasn’t flying hard,” Ginny said, walking past her friend and securing her Retro in its box. Kerney let it go when Ginny reappeared. “What are you doing down here anyway?”

“Wanted to ask you about a problem I’m having with Nadia and Stevie,” Kerney said. The girls walked together back up to the castle. “They destroyed a suit of armor on the third floor.”

“How?” Those things were nearly indestructible.

Kerney leveled a look at Ginny. “Does it matter?”

“Well, it might. That’s impressive.”

“They’re both in detention.”

Ginny redid her ponytail, securing pieces of hair that had escaped the elastic. “Then what did you need to talk to me about?”

“They said you taught them the spell.”

Ginny smiled. She couldn’t help it, even though she knew her friend might actually be upset about this. “Was there a face imprinted on the armor?”

“Yes,” Kerney said dryly.

“It’s a harmless spell.”

"It's defacement of school property," Kerney said. "Which I'm supposed to report to a professor and requires a minimum of three detentions."

"Three? That's ridiculous," Ginny said.

"Then can you help me reverse the spell?" Kerney asked. Seeing Ginny's hesitancy, she added, "It'll save them the next to detentions."

"You came to me before going to a professor?"

"I don't actually like giving out detentions," Kerney said.

So the girls made their way to the suit of armor where an impression of Snape with a twirling mustache was smiling back at them. Ginny laughed, and then set about fixing it.

"You shouldn't teach them spells like that," Kerney said as Ginny worked out the indented eyebrow. The armor squeaked in protest.

"They're trying to lighten the mood," Ginny said. "We could use that about now, with all the deaths and attacks." The paper that morning had announced three more disappearances.

"They're insulting a professor."

"I think Snape can handle it," Ginny said, even though he was probably the most resentful man she'd ever met. She was still upset about him wasting her on making menial potions. He wasn't even telling her what they were being used for, but Ginny was smart enough to piece together the information. Someone was working to create a Weather-changing Potion.

"Working with him hasn't made you close, I see," Kerney said.

"Hardly," Ginny scoffed.

"But you're as busy as always." It was a running joke between Andy and Kerney that Ginny was the busiest person they knew. It was true

that she took on a lot of extra projects, but she mostly enjoyed them all.

"I'm thinking of joining the Charms club," Ginny joked.

Kerney rolled her eyes. "You do have a spare hour Wednesday nights."

"Exactly. It's so boring," Ginny said, straightening. "All done. Armor is as shiny as ever."

Kerney looked it over. "Good. Now I can change the detentions."

"That's nice of you."

The Kernel shrugged, and they made their way back to the common room together in companionable silence. It was one of the things Ginny liked best about Kerney (and Andy): neither felt the need to chatter when there was nothing to talk about.

Another few days passed, and Ginny found herself sitting at lunch with a couple of people from the Quidditch team, but not really focusing on the conversation.

Harry Potter was looking preoccupied and troubled, and she had no idea why.

For her part, Ginny was tired and irritable. Her dream had freaked her out a lot more than she was willing to admit aloud. She had cast the Imperius and Cruciatus curses. She had no desire to cast the third Unforgivable. So sleep wasn't exactly coming easy to her.

Yet she told no one.

It's stupid, she thought to herself. I should be telling someone something. And soon. This could mean something more.

But she couldn't bring herself to mention it to anyone. They had enough to deal with. Dumbledore was trying to hold together the school, Harry looked like he was dealing with a lot, and her brother

and Hermione were always working together in the library with him when Ginny saw them.

“Haven’t you finished that Charms essay yet?” Andy asked late one night, seeing Ginny at a table in the corner of the common room.

“Actually, I have. This is just extra studying.” Bad as the essay might be, it was done. Doing schoolwork was the only thing she could really do as her insomnia hit full tilt. The small upside to her miserable condition was the fact that she was doing very well in her classes. Lessons that had always been easy for Ginny were suddenly almost ridiculously simple. The only classes she struggled in were Arithmancy and Charms, and she was still making decent marks there.

“Want any help?” Andy offered, looking over her meticulous notes.

“No, thanks,” she said. She might slack off on essays and assignments, but her notes were always top of the line. It was how she learned so quickly

He was clearly reaching out to her. Much like Kerney, he hadn’t seen much of her in the weeks since the term began except at the new D.A. meetings. He probably chalked it up to them both being busy, and Ginny felt badly about ignoring his olive branch, so she decided to try to talk to him.

“How’s Care of Magical creatures going?” Ginny asked, putting down her quill.

Andy smiled. “Good. Better than last year.”

“Hagrid hasn’t brought any strange animals?” She tried to remember if she’d heard anything, but couldn’t recall.

“Nothing too odd,” Andy said, smiling. It was clear why so many girls were still fighting for him.

“You asked Nadine out yet?” she asked, kicking back a chair for him to sit in.

"You asked Harry out yet?" he asked back, sitting.

"Touché." Ginny rested her head on her hands. "You seem to be getting along better, though."

"Nah. We just don't want Kerney hexing us anymore," Andy said.

"You should ask her out," Ginny said, but she knew that he never would. His crush on Nadine Ryan was common knowledge all over the school, except to the girl herself.

"She'll come around eventually," he said, nodding to himself. "Anyway, I'm looking forward to the D.A. meeting tomorrow."

"Is it Friday?" Ginny asked, genuinely surprised.

Andy nodded. "And tomorrow's Saturday."

"Then I'm looking forward to the D.A. meeting myself," she said, surprised that she'd managed to forget such an important thing.

"And you sound like it, too," Andy said sarcastically.

Ginny felt like the conversation needed to get out of the direction it was heading into. So she went to the old fallback, a game that she and her friends had been playing ever since third year.

"Amanda Dorset or Gretchen Ramsey?" she asked.

"Gretchen Ramsey," Andy said instantly, as was required.

Ginny's attention piqued at this response. "Really? Over Amanda?"

Gretchen Ramsey was a Slytherin with dark brown-almost-black hair and blue eyes. Undeniably beautiful, she was also a rather intimidating seventh year whose brother was Head Boy. Amanda was a fifth year Hufflepuff that every bloke thought was hot. You were supposed to choose the person you'd rather sleep with.

"You're not allowed to ask for reasons," Andy said, citing the long-respected rules.

"Luna's much more fun at this game," Ginny muttered.

"Just because she gives you ridiculous reasons for her choices," Andy said.

Ginny smiled. The best one had been during fourth year when Luna had chosen Theodore Nott over Andy McGrath, because he 'is attractive to pluckbutter,' and she would be able to get them to dance on her toast (thus buttering it) at the breakfast table without any coaxing. Apparently coaxing pluckbutter to dance on your toast was heady business. It had been quite the coup for the squirrely Slytherin.

"She's just more fun than you," Ginny said with a smile.

"More fun than you, too," Andy said, making her laugh. She really needed to spend more time with him.

## CHAPTER 6

### To See and Be Seen

Ginny did not want to be in the bloody cold dungeons. She didn't want to be making yet another elixir for her cantankerous professor during her free time. In fact, she didn't want to be doing anything other than sleeping, which was, ironically, also the very last thing she wanted to be doing in the world because she was worried about having another nightmare. Since the first dream, she'd had a series of other ones that she could never remember clearly—certainly not like the first one.

Ginny was letting herself mope a bit more when her cauldron let out a resounding boom! It hadn't exploded, just made a noise loud enough to temporarily deafen her.

As she was scrambling to throw in some frog's eyes, a voice from the doorway asked, "What's going on in here?"

"Someone mislabeled the eye of newt," Ginny called back, not sure how loudly she was speaking while stirring the potion and adding more ingredients. It was salvageable but still highly volatile. The last thing she needed to deal with was Snape's smugness if she ruined a potion.

"Are you fixing the problem?"

"Yes," she said, eyes still locked on the potion as she stirred it three more times then abruptly stopped the wooden spoon. When it seemed to turn a lighter red, she hurriedly crushed a couple of taruga seeds and scooped them into the potion, which immediately settled to a clear orange. Perfect.

"Looks good," he said, and this time she actually looked over to see who was speaking, brushing a piece of hair out of her eyes. Oh, dear. It was the Head Boy, Baron Ramsey.

"Yes," she said, nodding at the potion. "The elixir will be fine in a couple of hours."

"What happened?" he asked, stepping closer to her workstation. He was tall with dark hair, blue eyes, and a serious air about him.

She picked up a jar. "I trusted the label. Novice mistake."

He eyed the neatly written label, and nodded. "But everything is all right now?"

She nodded. "All settled. I just have to clean up."

"Is this a personal potion?"

"No. It is for Professor Snape."

"I'll have to ask him about it," Baron said.

"All right," she said, extinguishing the fire beneath her cauldron. "He'll probably be glad to know it's done."

Baron looked amused. "If that's all, then I should walk you back to your common room."

"You should?" she asked, watching him curiously.

"It's already past curfew, and you would risk being caught again if you went by yourself."

How long had she been working on this awful potion?

"I didn't realize how late it was," Ginny said, charming her things into her bag even as she meticulously packed away her ingredients and put the finished cauldron of potion on Snape's desk. He would collect and examine it by the morning.

Baron waited patiently.

"Okay," she said, checking around to make sure she didn't leave anything behind before focusing on the Head Boy, who really was quite good looking. "I'm ready to go. Thanks for waiting."



He nodded, and they left the room together. The extent of their acquaintance had never gone past greetings in the corridors between classes or brief words on the Quidditch pitch. She was intrigued, to say the least, as they began the trek to Gryffindor Tower.

"Why were you working on a potion for Professor Snape?" he asked.

"Because I'm a masochist," she answered, feeling like that was a particularly truthful answer.

"If that were the case, you wouldn't have kept your potion from exploding," Baron said in his deep, strong voice. Othello had been right at the beginning of the term, there was something captivating about Baron Ramsey in person. Maybe it was the intensity of his personality.

"Well, I may be willing to hurt myself, but this is my favorite uniform," she said smilingly.

He was amused, and let the subject go.

"Were you on patrol tonight?" Ginny asked, nodding at his lit badge.

"No," Baron said, "but when I heard the noise in the potions classroom, I thought I ought to investigate."

A few more corridors passed in silence as they two made their way out of the freezing dungeons and into the main area. A helpful staircase brought them even close to their destination without trouble.

"How is it being Head Boy?" Ginny asked, stepping off the stair into the corridor of maps.

"It's challenging," he said, glancing down at her. "But rewarding."

Well, that sounded boring, too, but Ginny didn't think that opinion would go over well with the serious bloke.

"You still have time to practice with the Quidditch team?" Ginny asked.

He gave her a small smile. "Of course."

"Well, I just wouldn't want your team to have an excuse for why they're going to lose to us again this year," she said. "Claiming that their star Keeper was preoccupied with Head Boy duties would undermine our victory."

"We have the only Seeker who comes even remotely close to challenging yours," Baron said, "and we are known for our strategies."

Both of those things were true, if never discussed much in the Gryffindor common room. Draco Malfoy was a brilliant Seeker, much as it pained Ginny to admit. He just wasn't as good as Harry. No one was.

"We'll both beat Ravenclaw," he said.

"I hope so. They're in a transition year with a new captain," Ginny allowed.

"Roman is doing a good job with the team, and he's the best Keeper at this school," Baron said, which was nice considering that was his position as well. Roman was weakest on the left side, Ginny knew, though she didn't mention it. Baron and she played on opposing teams, after all. "Their Chasers, however, could use some pointers from you and Katie Bell."

"After we beat them," Ginny said, "and before they play you, I might stop by their practice sessions."

He smiled.

"Hufflepuff's the real force this year," she said as they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady that marked the entrance to Gryffindor. "We'll both have trouble with them."

"Bruce and Bowen will make it challenging for all the Chasers and Seekers."

“They’re very good at hitting the Bludgers around, aren’t they?” she asked.

“That they are.”

“Thank you for walking me back,” she said, glancing at the portrait that marked the entrance to the common room.

“You’re welcome. I enjoyed talking with you.”

Ginny smiled. “Next time I have a detention, you could use your power to make it an easy menial task, and we could talk again.”

“I wouldn’t abuse my power like that,” he said.

“Even for some insider knowledge about Hufflepuff Chaser strategies?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Bribery from a Gryffindor,” he said, amused.

“Bribery’s not against the rules,” she said.

“Oh?”

“My brothers gave me a copy of the school rules for Christmas when I was six. I thought it was a game and had the thing memorized by eight,” she said with a smile.

“We’ll see about the detentions,” he said, eyes lighting up a touch.

She laughed. “No, we won’t. You’re too fair for that.”

He nodded. “Probably.”

“That’s alright. Good night, Baron,” she said.

“Good night, Ginevra,” he replied with a nod, and though he did not deign to smile, his eyes twinkled with what Ginny suspected to be mirth.

When he was out of sight, Ginny gave the password and finally made her way into the Gryffindor common room. As she entered through the portrait hole, she thought she felt something brush past her. But she hadn't seen anything around her, and was much too tired to investigate further. She slumped into a couch, throwing her things on the table in front of it in relief. She had meant to just rest for a moment before heading to bed, but she nodded off before moving.

"Ginevra," the voice called out quietly. "Ginevra."

"No," she said. This dream felt familiar.

"You've been avoiding me," the woman said, appearing in front of her, and Ginny nearly recoiled.

"You're dead," Ginny said, remembering with sudden clarity where she was. The dream she had been trying to avoid. The dream she had been dreading.

"I'm your guide," Mrs. Black said. She was wearing the loveliest formal robes Ginny had ever seen, and if she weren't trying so hard to wake herself up, she might have been impressed that her mind could conjure such a thing.

"You're not real. I shouldn't be here," Ginny said, looking around for a way to escape, only to find Sirius staring at her from the floor where he had landed after she had cast the Cruciatus on him.

Even as remembering her actions made her want to throw up, she felt a swell of pride. She had been powerful.

"Yes," Mrs. Black whispered, walking around to stand behind Ginny and whisper in her ear. "You were in control. You taught him a lesson about leaving."

"I hurt him," she said, hating herself. She wasn't like this; she wasn't this cruel.

"You're powerful," Mrs. Black said. "And if you don't use your power, it'll hurt someone by accident. Channel it. Control it. Take control of yourself."

But it was Sirius who spoke so angrily to her: "You can't control yourself. You barely know who you are."

"I am in control!" she yelled, angry beyond measure that Sirius accused her of the one thing she most hated in the world.

He laughed mockingly. "You're just a child playing with power beyond your understanding."

"I fought against it!" Was this anger her own? Could it be?

"You couldn't even bring yourself to kill me quickly," Sirius sneered. "Just torture me. You're pathetic."

"I'm your better!" She lifted her wand. "Let that be the last thing you know! Avada Kedavra."

The green spell was beautiful. It looked like spring. Like new evergreen needles and Harry's eyes. It moved like waves in the middle of the ocean toward Sirius, where he lay sneering at her.

The rush she felt when he crumpled was intoxicating. Power beyond power. Strength beyond strength. She felt like she was going to explode, like magic was flooding through her body, as if she were attempting a 500-foot vertical dive on her broom, blindfolded. Only it was better. As her hand made the appropriate wand movements, she thought briefly that she would definitely have to do this again.

She was his better, and now everyone would know it.

"Didn't you find it odd, Ginevra of the Light Weasleys," Mrs. Black asked, piercing through her euphoria, "that you couldn't manage the Patronus Charm for a year but the Unforgivables come as easily as breathing?"

And just like that, her joy crumbled and she really saw the death she had produced, the man who lay prone on the ground. Beaten. Dead.

Oh Merlin. What had she done? What had she become? This was wrong. Wrong. Awful. Please let this not be real. Please let it end.

She woke when the cold pain seeped through her, tearing a scream from her throat without warning. There was no time to remember where she was, let alone cast a Silencing Charm. The pain overwhelmed her, spreading everywhere, and then everything went black when it became too much.

The voices were hazy and choppy.

"Found her in...screaming...pain," said one.

"Stun her," said another. Then the words turned back into nonsense and someone was pouring liquid down her throat, and even as she gagged, she felt cold relief.

Ginny woke when light unexpectedly hit her face. Normally she drew her curtains shut tightly, and as the winter approached and days grew shorter, she was starting to rise before the sun altogether. She popped one eye open a bit, and was surprised to find herself in the Hospital Wing.

"You're up," said the clipped voice of Professor Snape.

Ginny forced both her eyes open, though they felt heavy, and tried to sit up more, but couldn't. "What happened?"

"You tell me," he said, staring into her

"I was attacked?"

"No," he said.

"Oh." That was disappointing since she was now remembering her dream and where she had fallen asleep the night before. Someone

must have found her in the common room in the midst of that icy-cold attack.

“The Head Boy tells me you were working on a potion last night,” Snape said. Oh, that explained why Snape was there.

She nodded. “The elixir you wanted.”

“Did you make yourself a different potion at that time?” he asked, though he clearly didn’t think she had. He’d be cursing her, taking away points, or possibly trying to expel her if he thought she had taken advantage of his stores like that.

“No.”

“Then tell me what happened,” he said, his black eyes locking on hers. A sudden flash of memories shot to the surface of her mind: leading two boys to a cave, making a bureau shake, sitting in a room with four boys at a round table. Ginny recoiled instinctively from the images that she had buried deeply in her mind, pushing them away only to find herself panting and staring at Snape.

“What the hell was that?” she asked, though she had an idea. Legilimency. “You aren’t allowed to use that on students!”

“Who were those boys?” Snape asked coldly.

Her face closed off. “None of your concern, professor.”

“You used wandless magic on your potion last night, didn’t you?” he asked, changing subjects quickly.

“What does that have to—”

“Answer me.”

“No,” she said, briefly thinking back. “Yes. Someone mislabeled the eye of newt and—”

“Don’t use it again.”

“My wandless magic?” Ginny asked. “How do you even know about that?”

He stood dismissively. “Your werewolf teacher should have told you about the risks involved.”

“In what?”

“Read a book.” He waved a hand. “Wandless magic comes at a price.”

“I don’t understand, professor.”

He was already at the door. “Figure it out.”

Lying in the infirmary with just the memory of her dream—of Mrs. Black’s words and Sirius’s face—was rather lonely business. None of her friends had come to visit, though it was still early in the day. But she often skived off classes without them, and even occasionally slept in the Room of Requirement or fell asleep in the common room. They wouldn’t know that anything was wrong until they heard the rumors of her being in the hospital wing. It had been the same way with the Department of Mysteries business.

Then a black-haired bloke peeked around the hospital wing door, and Ginny sat up a bit straighter.

“Harry?”

“Hey, Ginny,” he said, glancing around nervously as if Madam Pomfrey would pop out at any minute and sequester him to a bed just for being there.

“She’s in her office with another student,” Ginny said, smiling.

“Good.” He stepped fully into the room, holding a plate in his hands. “I brought you food.”



Among her many quirks, the matron's ban on normal food was considered the worst, and Ginny was very thankful she had a friend with such blatant disregard for that rule.

"Excellent," she said, grinning when Harry put the plate on the table beside Ginny, pulling it over for easy access. It looked as if he'd had absolutely no idea what she liked, and thus he'd put a bit of everything on there. "Thank you."

"The crackers Madame Pomfrey forces down your throat when a potion requires a full stomach just don't substitute real food," Harry said, settling into the visitor's chair.

"How'd you know I was here?" she asked, picking up the fork with still-shaking hands. Pomfrey said that would last a while.

Harry looked up from the plate. "I'm the one who brought you here."

She dropped her utensil. "You were?"

He nodded.

She was tired and aching and scrambling to cover up her horror. "What were you doing up at that hour?"

Harry seemed to nearly laugh, but settled for looking incredulous. "What are you doing having spasms in the middle of the night in the common room?"

"I had a nightmare."

"I have nightmares. I don't have convulsions," Harry said bluntly. Ginny straightened herself.

"I didn't say it was normal. It's not. But it happened, and now it's done." She'd given in to all of Mrs. Black's alluring words, all her demands and enticements. Ginny had pushed death out of her wand and hurled it at Sirius Black. And now she felt broken, torn apart then stitched back together like those Muggles did, never quite closing the wound properly. That had to be the end.

“Ginny, tell me what’s going on,” he said evenly.

She didn’t want to. Didn’t want to confess her own worst memories. But he was the hero. The boy wonder. Her personal savior. And more than that, he was Harry. Nice little Harry Potter who had been raised by Muggles and survived the Dark Lord four times. If anyone would understand, it would be him.

So she told him.

“I’ve been having dreams,” she began.

She told him that she didn’t know what was going on, that she was scared, frightened, that she had cast all three Unforgivables in her dreams and now she felt like she was falling apart. She wrapped her arms around her bent legs as she tried to paint for him the images she had seen and the sensations she had felt in her dreams.

She told him about Sirius and what she had done to him in her dreams, and she didn’t dare look up at him during that. Just kept talking. And he sat there listening. When she did manage to turn to him, she nearly stopped speaking altogether. He looked so tired and worn that she was surprised he didn’t pass out on the spot.

Ginny still didn’t know what mysterious knowledge had been eating at him and weighing his shoulders down ever since June, but she thought, as his entire body seemed to tense up even more, that it might make him explode.

Because it wasn’t just his grief that he was reacting to, but her own fears as well. Her utter disgust and horror at what she had done, even if it hadn’t been real. Because it had been real to her; she’d heard Mrs. Black goading her on, she’d felt the intoxicating power of the curses, and as Harry had just found out, she’d endured the aftermath of them as well.

When she had told him everything about her dreams, her lack of sleep, and her own self-doubt, she leaned back and watched Harry.

After he had scrutinized the couch cushions several times in various sequences, he spoke rather abruptly.

“Sirius?” he asked, looking up at her.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know.”

He seemed shaken, and the guilt was back. The guilt that had permeated from him after the Department of Mysteries fight. But she could see the moment where he pushed his own feelings aside and decided to help her.

“Have you told anyone else about this?” he asked, already transforming before her eyes from the awkward boy of sixteen whom she had gotten to know so well over the summer into the man-child hero who bore too many burdens already. Ginny supposed that the world should be grateful that Harry was most comfortable when dealing with things beyond what any teenager ought to endure.

“No. I didn’t quite know how to bring up the fact that my subconscious is a psycho,” she muttered, trying to shrug, but wincing when she felt how tight all of her muscles were.

Harry shook his head. “You’re not a psycho.”

“I cast three Unforgivables on your godfather in my dreams.”

He flinched, but then briefly shook himself and looked very seriously at her. “In one of my dreams, I bit your father in the neck while thinking I was a poisonous snake. And I’ve seen myself cast all of the Unforgivables, too, including Avada Kedavra on a Muggle gardener. If you’re a psycho, so am I.”

She felt a physical ache at his empathy, but smothered it with humor.

“Guess you were the perfect person to find me then,” she said.

“Yep,” Harry said, looking pointedly at her still-shaking hands.

She took an unsteady breath. “I didn’t want to hurt him.”

Harry nodded. “I know.”

And that was all it took for her resolve to nearly crumble.

Because Harry knew what it was like, after all, to hate yourself for things you didn’t mean to do, to bear grief for actions you hadn’t committed. She hadn’t wanted anyone to see her like this, but as Ginny sagged against Harry’s shoulder, she couldn’t help but feel glad that he was near.

“Thank you,” Ginny said.

“I didn’t really do much.”

“Now’s not the time to dig for compliments, Harry. I’m too tired to inflate your ego,” Ginny half-whispered with her still-scratchy voice.

“Ginny, can you speak Parseltongue?” Harry asked.

That came out of nowhere. “Excuse me?”

“Because I know why I have my dreams,” Harry said. “And it’s the same reason I speak Parseltongue: because I’m connected to Voldemort.”

That made sense. Sucked for Harry, though, who looked haunted by the thought.

“When did you learn that?” Ginny asked.

“A while ago.” His gaze sharpened. “Actually, it was at the Chamber.”

“Really?”

"Yeah. That year, I heard the Basilisk in the walls. Didn't know what it was, though," Harry said. Ginny couldn't remember releasing the snake on her own, but through her memories of Riddle she had vague recollections of speaking to snakes. Not fun.

"I bet it haunts Tom every day, his failed attempt to kill you," Ginny said, imagining the snake-faced bastard pacing in some dank, dark hall reliving the day Lily Potter's love bested him. It made Ginny smile. For all that people called Dumbledore "The Only Man He Ever Feared," it was a Muggle-born witch who beat him in the end. Ironic. Awesome.

"To answer your question, no, I don't speak Parsletongue," she said. "I tried to speak to a snake once, after the Chamber, and couldn't say a single word."

"They're not very good conversationalists anyway," he offered. Ginny smiled somewhat weakly.

"That's good. Wouldn't want to think I'm missing out on anything," she said.

"But it means we still can't explain your dreams."

Harry's face had changed in recent years. Gone was any trace of child-like features. Now he had a strong jaw line, prominent cheekbones, and a more grown up look. The only things that remained the same were the haunted, green eyes that had always been too old.

"Harry, you and I had very different experiences," Ginny said, resting her head against the wall to speak to him. "You and Voldemort are bound by dreams and scars and magical gifts. Tom Riddle was sixteen and very human during our exchanges. He taught me about schoolwork and secrets passages. Voldemort just tried to kill you."

"I suppose," Harry said, eyes clouding over. He seemed to retreat into his mind, but Ginny wouldn't let him simply disappear.

“Harry, why were you in the common room at that hour?” she asked. “When you found me.”

“I had a meeting,” he answered.

“One of the ones with Dumbledore?” she asked in the same, innocuous manner.

He looked briefly surprised, as if he’d forgotten that he’d told her about them over the holiday. “Yes.”

“He kept you late,” she noted.

Harry fidgeted. “It’s hard to fall asleep after some lessons.”

“That sounds like a good time, then,” Ginny said.

Harry watched her carefully for a long time, and she let him, eyes locked on his. They had faced worse together before—the Chamber and the Ministry. Yet a conversation seemed to cause him the most anxiety. He’d probably be more comfortable with her if she were hurling hexes at him, she thought. Blokes were stupid like that.

“They’re not that bad, the lessons,” Harry admitted. “Useful, really. Dumbldore’s finally telling me everything that I want to know. Answering questions.”

“That’s good,” Ginny said. “I’m so used to people keeping me in the dark that I can’t imagine what it must be like to acquire information without a lot of sneaking and extendable ears.”

Harry nodded. “The worst is only hearing snippets of information, bits that just make you more curious.”

“Or hearing your name and not really understanding why someone would be talking about you,” Ginny said, nodding. She’d been a little sister for a long time, and her brothers had an even longer history of trying to keep things from their younger siblings.

“He’s showing me all the memories of Tom’s childhood he could gather in a Pensieve,” Harry said quietly, making Ginny’s jaw nearly drop.

“Of the orphanage and things?” she asked, wind knocked out of her.

“How do you know about that?” Harry asked, and she remained silent. “From Tom?”

She nodded. “He showed me some things.”

And others she simply remembered as if they were her own memories. Memories she buried.

It always surprised her that no one ever asked her what her nightmares had been about after that year, about what she heard when the Dementors came too close. They only knew she had blacked out during the horrible stuff, knew she had no memories of that.

“It’s weird to see him that way,” Harry said. “Young and human.”

Young and good-looking and charming.

“Evil should be ugly,” Ginny said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Evil is evil, no matter its form,” Harry said, staring at the far wall.

Ginny grabbed his hand. They shared this burden.

Harry held her little hand tightly, but didn’t turn to face her. “I look a lot like him.”

“No, you don’t,” she said, surprised.

Now he looked at her. “I’ve seen him, Ginny. I saw him when I was twelve. He commented on it himself, how alike we were.”

“He was lying. Or just wrong. Even megalomaniacs can be wrong, you know,” she said, remembering Tom’s perfect face: aquiline nose and almond eyes, so caring and ready to listen. He looked like a drug.

Harry didn’t seem convinced.

“Don’t you think I would know better than anyone whether you looked like him? Whether you were like him?” she asked. “Don’t you think I’d have avoided you?”

“I’m the same height and the same—” Harry glanced at the wall. “I know him.”

Ginny shook her head. “When you look at me, you make me think that I’ll be okay. That I’m all right the way I am. Tom always made me feel like I needed to change. To do something. To earn him.” She stopped speaking to still her memories, shaking her head shortly. “I don’t think you’re like him at all.”

“Do you remember him well?” Harry asked. They had never talked about this, which seemed rather silly at that moment, because who could understand this better than they?

“Yeah. I do. I remember a lot about him,” Ginny said, taking a breath. “I remember a lot of the people he hurt, too.”

“Really?” Harry asked, surprised. She wished he’d stop feeling that way around her already.

“He tried to pull me into him,” Ginny said, listless and aching. “He tried to remake me as himself. I saw all of him.”

It was several long moments before Harry spoke. “I don’t know much about you, do I, Ginny?”

She blinked to push back the sudden, unexpected, awful tears that sprang up. “No, Harry, you don’t.”

But he knew more than he used to.



He took a breath. "I'm glad I was the one that found you. Even if you didn't want me to."

"I always want to see you, Harry," she said, still watching him. "But you look tired."

He ran a hand over his eyes. "I'm all right."

"I wish you'd sleep more," she said. He ran his free hand through his messy hair.

"I know." He sounded resigned to the imminence of darker times, and she hoped that he knew that she understood what it meant. He gave her shoulder a little squeeze and continued. "I've been watching you for the past few weeks, you know. You could stand to take a little of your own advice." Ginny couldn't help but smile fully at his admission.

"I know, Harry. I suppose we both need to be better at taking care of ourselves." She paused for a moment, wanting to test the boundaries of their ever-expanding friendship. "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"If I told you to bugger off so I could rest, would you go try to get some sleep too?" she asked plainly.

"Yes," he replied, aided by a yawn bursting up from his lungs.

"Are you lying?" She saw him smile at the question with a half-chuckle, as if he had been expecting it.

"No."

Ginny closed her eyes to indulge the exhaustion that was creeping up on her again. "Promise?"

"I promise." He sounded affectionate.

"Okay," she replied. And it really was.

“Good,” he said. Ginny opened her eyes and sat up straight, at which point Harry continued. “So, about these dreams you’ve been having.”

“Yeah?”

“I think you should tell someone about them,” Harry said. She wanted to protest, but he cut her off. “It was one of the things that Sirius made me promise him, that I’d tell someone—Dumbledore, him, Remus—when I had one of my dreams. It’s why I was so quick to go to Dumbledore about your dad.”

Ginny sighed. “That’s not fair, you know, pulling the ‘telling-my-dreams-saved-your-dad’s-life’ card. That makes all my arguments against your advice sound petty.”

Harry smiled. “If it’s any conciliation, I feel like you might be the first person I’ll talk to about my dreams from now on since I know you’ll understand.”

And at that moment, with that last sentence, Ginny felt, for the first time, that Harry saw her. Truly saw her. Not as Ron’s little sister, not as his study partner or another Quidditch teammate, but as Ginevra Molly Weasley, the one who knew, who understood, and yet was still there at his side.

Though she had been ignored, overlooked, underestimated, and excluded, she had always been there—perhaps in the background, but still always there. And he finally realized that she understood his anger, his sorrow, his guilt, his fear, but most of all, his resolve not to falter, his determination to avenge and protect the people they loved. Because it was her determination, too.

“How about I tell Professor Snape,” she suggested.

“Snape?” Harry asked, disbelieving.

“Well, he was just here, and he seems to know a lot more about what happened than he’s letting on.”

“Like what?”

"I don't know," she said, shrugging. "But he mentioned my wandless magic."

Harry nodded. "Then you should ask Remus about it, not Snape."

"I'd rather ask Snape," Ginny said truthfully.

"Why?" Harry looked truly dumbfounded.

"He knows about Dark Magic."

"And that makes him trustworthy?"

"Makes him knowledgeable," Ginny said. "If I'd gone to him in first year asking about black outs, he probably would have known what was going on."

"Dumbledore knows just as much."

"He's a bit busy." Plus, though she would never say so, Professor Dumbledore wasn't the most approachable professor. Harry and he were close, everyone knew that, but despite Ginny talking to him this past break, Dumbledore would always remain a lofty authority figure in her life, one she didn't necessarily go to first.

"Snape isn't fit to teach it."

"I actually work better with him than anyone but McGonagall," Ginny said, trying to defuse his anger. "Flitwick's constant encouragement is monotonous. I like being challenged."

"Snape's methods aren't challenging. They're invasive."

She paused. "You aren't talking about Potions, are you?"

Harry's fingers were white from the pressure of clenching his fists. "No. He taught me Occlumency last year."

Ginny didn't need to ask whether or not it went well. Harry was an intensely private person. She couldn't imagine anything that would make him more uncomfortable than an Occlumency lesson, especially with a man he hated and distrusted.

"I'll be okay," she assured him, lightly touching his tense hand. "I'm going to talk to him on Tuesday, because I have some questions, but if anything happens, I'll go straight to Dumbledore or McGonagall."

He clearly did not want to agree to this. Everything about his tense posture screamed his disapproval.

"When on Tuesday?" he asked, voice clipped.

"At two. My lessons are over then."

"I'll be there," he said. "When it's done."

She smiled. "Waiting in the corridor outside his office? I don't even know how long it will take. It'll be pretty boring."

"I'll be there," he repeated.

Before today, agreeing to that arrangement would have been impossible. But Harry had seen her at her worst. She could agree to this now; so she nodded.

"But, Harry, I don't need a savior," Ginny said. She had enough protectors in the form of a horde of upstart brothers.

Harry shook his head. "I'm hardly that. Just a lucky friend."

A friend. That was enough for now, she thought as she lay back down to rest.

Ginny recovered quickly, which was fortunate. By that evening, she was up and walking around. The next morning, she was ready to go back to class.

"I thought for a minute that you'd left school," Kerney said when Ginny came to Charms with her the next morning.

"No. I'm not that lucky," Ginny said. Everyone seemed to have come up with their own explanation as to why she hadn't gone to class the day before. Having found out that she hadn't spent either of the last two nights in her own bed, some of the rumors were rather amusing. But this was an instance when having the twins for brothers actually helped her: there was nothing people didn't think she was capable of, and most of the stories were rather startlingly cool.

"You want my notes for the day?"

"That would be great," Ginny said, beginning her own.

Charms class seemed to drag on forever, which was very rare. Flitwick was powerful, clever, and very entertaining. His classes were almost always a good time. But Ginny was still feeling off. She continued to feel that way all through class, and even after when she, Andy, and Kerney left class.

It was Halloween the next day, and people in the corridor were practically buzzing with excitement.

"I know the feast is good," Ginny said, "but that little third year is going over the top with enthusiasm, don't you think?"

"The first Hogsmeade weekend was posted," Kerney said.

"Oh," Ginny said, adjusting her bag on her shoulder.

"You don't seem excited."

"Should I be?" she asked. She had a feeling that if she had even the smallest belief that Harry were going to ask her, she would be more interested. As it was, she didn't care at all.

Last year her brothers had still been around, and Hermione had called the meeting at the Hogs Head, so trips still held the excitement that she'd felt in her third year. But this year she no longer had a

boyfriend and would, in all honesty, be perfectly happy to spend that entire day flying circles in the empty pitch or working with McGonagall studying Healing.

They went to their next class, History, together, but Kerney sat with Othello in the back while Andy and Ginny settled into the empty table in the middle of the room.

"You excited about Hogsmeade?" she asked.

His eyes briefly went to Nadine before he refocused on his book. "I guess."

"Are you going to ask anyone?" she asked innocently.

He gave her a look.

"I'll work this out on my own," Andy said, clearly indicating that he wanted Ginny to back off.

"Girls are going to ask you," Ginny said.

"Not the right ones," he said, making Ginny's heart break a little.

By the end of the lesson, the students who weren't asleep wished they were. There was absolutely nothing more boring than fairy politics, especially since their lifespans were so short. There were at least a dozen family lines to keep track of, all too complicated to properly dissect.

"This essay is going to be vile," Ginny said, stuffing her parchment into her bag.

"At least you took good notes," Colin said, walking past her. "All I have is a dream about a detention to help me."

"You can borrow my notes," Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

"Thanks," he said, waving as he headed out the door.

“Come on, Andy,” Nadine said. “We have CoMC now.”

He nodded, and said bye to Ginny, who left the classroom alone, only to see Kerney and Othello waiting for her outside the door.

“Ginny!” called a voice from down the corridor. She turned to see Duncan Moran approaching. She smiled.

“Duncan!” she responded in kind, earning a smile from him, and a snort of amusement from the Kernel.

“Nice to see you again, Othello, Scott,” he said, nodding at Kerney, who, despite her fervent belief that Duncan was a useless git, shared a humorous acquaintance with him by virtue of knowing each other since they were kids. She also had been forced to admit once, in the course of playing the question game, not only that she thought Duncan was one of the best looking blokes in the school, but that she would not be averse to a good, thorough snog, should the occasion ever arise. So his attentions were not the least bit unwelcome, on either account.

“I have to go meet Matt and Gabe just now, but I was wondering,” he said, focusing his light brown eyes on Ginny’s chocolaty ones, “if you’d go with me to Hogsmeade next weekend.”

Ginny blinked and didn’t respond for a moment, out of sheer lack of understanding. It wasn’t until Kerney elbowed her in the ribs that she came back to the conversation.

“I’m sorry, what?” she asked incredulously. Kerney sighed and shook her head.

“I asked you to Hogsmeade.” Duncan Moran was not the type of boy who was either shy or easily deterred by a girl’s lack of positive response to his overtures.

“Oh, right. Hogsmeade.” Ginny was quite at a loss. More for lack of anything else to say than an actual inclination to go, she looked up at Duncan and said, “All right, sure.”

He smiled his big, lovely, toothy smile, and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. Ginny continued to stand in the middle of the corridor, blinking dazedly as he did.

"Talk to you later, then, Ginny," he said happily as he walked away. "Bye Kerney!" he shouted jubilantly. The Kernel waved back overzealously (to say nothing of mockingly). At Ginny's continued look of shocked numbness, Kerney began to laugh heartily. Ginny did not appreciate this.

"What the hell was that?" she asked, pointing in the direction that Duncan had gone.

"You were asked on a date."

"By Duncan Moran?" Ginny asked.

"That's him," Kerney said, nodding. "And you said yes."

Ginny shook her head. "I was tricked."

"Into dating one of the most sought-after blokes in school?" Kerney asked skeptically.

"Yes," Ginny said. She liked Harry. She knew and accepted that now. Michael Corner had taught her exactly how awful it was to be in a relationship with one bloke when you didn't really like him as much as another guy.

The Kernel laughed quite hard at this and patted Ginny on the back as they continued on their way to Gryffindor Tower after leaving Luna to find the Ravenclaw Common Room.

By the end of the weekend, four more boys had asked Ginny to Hogsmeade, and she had to admit that she appreciated Duncan's invitation in one regard at least: it gave her a legitimate reason to turn all the others down.

Ginny wasn't too surprised that Ron had yet become aware of her date; he, Harry, and Hermione were in full-on Trio mode at the



moment, talking quietly at the table, always in the library, carrying around books that had nothing to do with their lessons, and looking more tired each day. Plus, Harry was dealing with a flood of adoration from the entire school, who all seemed to be trying to make up for turning against him the previous year. A lot of girls were going above and beyond, teetering on stalking. Ginny was slightly amused by this, though she was sure that had a lot to do with Harry looking overwhelmed and confused by the girls (while trying to avoid them).

It was a nice break from school when Slytherin played Hufflepuff, beating them by 40 points. The game had gone on for over six hours by the time Malfoy snatched the Snitch out from under Barry Summerb. And although Hufflepuff had scored eleven goals to Slytherin's zero, Baron Ramsey had played an inspired game as Keeper for Slytherin, seeing as Hufflepuff had pretty much poured a six-hour assault of shots down on him.

Jamie Bowen and Bruce Healy had wiped the floor with Crabbe and Goyle, and had so frustrated the Slytherin Chasers that seventh-year Dante Caulfield had been thrown out of the game four hours in, after he tried to knock Jamie Bowen off her broom. Bowen and Healy's stellar play had allowed the Hufflepuff Chasers free reign on poor Baron, who had made one spectacular save after another to keep his team in the game.

And despite the fact that she utterly loathed Draco Malfoy, and even though he had never been able to beat Harry to the Snitch, she couldn't deny that he was an excellent Seeker in his own right. She wasn't the least bit confident that she could beat him in head-to-head competition.

At any rate, it looked as though the match-up of the year was still going to be her and Katie Bell against Jamie and Bruce. If the Gryffindor Chasers got in over their heads, Harry was certainly up to the task when it came to getting the Snitch in time, but Ginny was determined to prevent that from happening.

"Miss Weasley." Snape was as gracious as ever when she stepped into the dungeons on Tuesday.

She looked into his vacant black eyes. "I had some questions, professor."

He gave her a disdainful look. "Class is over."

"I know, sir. They were about what you said in the hospital wing," she said, her voice even and polite.

"Tell me why you were there to begin with."

"I had a dream," she began, and launched into a somewhat shorter version of her dreams and the pain that followed in their wake. She talked about the high she felt casting the Unforgivables, the power that flooded through her. If there was one good thing about Snape, it was that Ginny could never feel like he had the moral high ground, though he certainly conveyed his 's countenance began to darken the more she went on, and he was scowling deeply by the time she finished.

"How long has this been happening?"

"The first nightmare happened a couple of weeks ago."

"And you experienced the same piercing cold?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," she said.

"So this began weeks ago, and yet you never felt it pertinent to approach someone about it," Snape said, practically slapping her with his judgmental tone.

"It was a dream."

"That left you in debilitating pain, with weakened mental shields," he sneered.

"I didn't have weakened—" A sudden pressure in her head made Ginny stop speaking, and she swatted at it mentally.

"In the hospital wing, I saw thoughts you hide," he said, giving her a long look. "How many of the Dark Lord's memories do you harbor?"

She tensed. "They've been vague, but I know some faces. I recognize a few things."

He gave her a long look.

"The pain you experienced and its affects have nothing to do with the Unforgivables you cast in your slumber," Snape said, standing and changing the subject. "While they require a great deal of energy and hatred, they do not weaken you."

"Then what--"

"The cold you described is rare and associated with Dark Mind Magic," he said as if that explained everything.

When he didn't go on, she said, "I don't understand, sir."

He gave her a disdainful look. "The Dark Lord's memories are becoming stronger, aren't they?"

Not wanting to agree aloud, she settled for nodding.

"Pay attention. It isn't difficult. You suppressed those memories. But when that little house elf unlocked your wandless magic, he took away your self-made barriers. And the werewolf taught you to use your magic as if it were a gift, with no thought to the consequences."

Wandless magic came from mental wards breaking. Ginny knew that. Someone had compared it to magic leaking out of her by accident.

Ginny protested, "Professor Lupin uses wandless—"

"Lupin is a werewolf. His mental wards are breached monthly. Yours were closed, and now you've opened them. Repeatedly." Snape looked particularly disdainful.

"So what?" she asked. "The memories are just going to keep growing? Mrs. Black will keep showing up in my head?"

He walked into his office and reappeared with a vial, which he handed her. "Take this, and refrain from wandless magic."

"And that's it? I'll be healed?" Her tone made her disbelief perfectly clear.

"Do you want the Dark Lord's memories?"

Of hurting other children? Of loneliness and realizing that the orphanage was beneath him? Of deciding that greatness came with power

"No," she said.

"Then take the vial, and stop the wandless magic."

None of this really made sense to her, but the conviction in his voice could not be denied.

"Why were you in the hospital wing?" she asked. It had been bothering her since that day.

"Madam Pomfrey needed my help," he said

"She didn't know what was wrong with me," Ginny said, suddenly certain.

"Your injuries were not incurred by an outside source."

"They were internal?"

He said nothing, but she decided right then that she would take the potion and avoid wandless magic until she had the chance to read more about it.

The meeting left Ginny unsettled and uncomfortable. The only bright spot was Harry Potter sitting in the corridor, hunched over a textbook

asleep. She gently shook him awake, a headache pounding. He jolted, pointing his wand around wildly, before orienting himself, smiling at her, and then standing to hand her a Chocolate Frog and talk.

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Still thinking about her conversation with Professor Snape, Ginny wasn't in the mood for anything, much less a boring Defense class. She had not taken the potion yet, and she was mad at herself for inexplicably hesitating. She wasn't normally a cautious sort of person, and couldn't quite articulate her decision, which made her irritable. It was a day after the conversation in the dungeons, and casting miniature shields to trap the six little ants crawling around irritated Ginny for no reason. Professor Wrightman had set up the assignment in order to help them sharpen their focus, but Ginny was bored.

Bored in these classes that dredged on about steps she already understood. Bored in classes where professors like McGonagall refused to acknowledge Ginny's own brilliance.

The arrogance of that last thought—and her sharp bitterness—shocked her. It was almost foreign, the anger that had spiked within her.

But still, she thought, they should have let me take the O.W.L.s early. She already knew everything she needed to.

"Your assignment for tomorrow," Professor Wrightman was saying, but Ginny blocked her out, not really caring. It was probably more reading or practice, and Ginny wasn't about to do more of this.

"You coming?" Andy asked.

Ginny looked up at where he stood with his bag on his shoulder, and shook her head. "I have a meeting with the professor."

He waved. "See you later, then."

He filed out with the rest of the class while Ginny played with her miniature shields, ushering the ants along the line on her desk. It was the assessment the professor had demanded the first day of class.

“Miss Weasley?” Professor Wrightman said, walking over to her. The tiny, blonde woman always wore heels, Ginny thought.

“Professor,” Ginny said, dropping the shields and letting Wrightman levitate the insects back to the ant farm on her desk.

“What did you think of today’s assignment?”

Did she want a real answer? Ginny doubted it. Professors never did. “It was good practice for those having difficulty placing their shields.”

“And you?”

She looked into her teacher’s pale blue eyes. “It was fine.”

“Fine?”

Ginny took a breath. “Professor, I’ve been in your class for nearly two and a half months. You know what you’re doing, and you’re making sure the students know what they’re doing. You don’t need me to reassure you about your lesson plans.”

The sheer audacity and rudeness surprised even her, but Ginny was tired and irritable, with a dull ache in the back of her head. And being treated with kid gloves was the very last thing she needed just then.

“You don’t pay attention during lessons,” Wrightman said, arms crossed over her chest and pointer finger tapping her arm. “You hardly bother to write your essays. You don’t listen to your classmates. Do you want to fail?”

“I’m not failing,” Ginny said.

“You’re not trying either.”

“Do you know how easy this is for me?” Ginny asked, standing and casting a multi-spectrum shield strong enough to deflect a direct hit and malleable enough to adjust to clever hexes. “Do you know that I can see a hex name and just know how to bend my wand and change my shield to make it block the attack? Do you know how frustrating it is to do all of that and then have to sit in this classroom and pretend like the other students’ questions aren’t moronic just because some old Ministry official decided fifteen-year-olds could never take the O.W.L.s early?”

Wrightman watched her with cool, distant eyes.

“Then maybe,” the woman said, “we should consider changing our arrangement.”

That was the day Ginny started her own independent study. She never went to Defense class again.

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Losing one class while picking up an independent study project was a most welcome change to Ginny’s schedule, and it put her in a much better mood, even if she had to continue Potions with Snape. In fact, Ginny was in such a good mood that she didn’t even realize what it meant that everyone in the D.A. had mastered the Conjunctivitis Curse faster than Harry had anticipated. Normally a cause for celebration, it also meant that the group voted to dive right into Patronuses.

“You’ve gone pale. Are you remembering a past life?” Luna asked with her curiously wide eyes trained on Ginny’s face.

“I wish,” Ginny muttered, thinking of her stupid stag Patronus. This room was full of people like Luna, Andy, and Parvati--purebloods who would know exactly what her twin Patronus meant. And if that weren’t bad enough, Ron stood right next to Harry, and would see her Patronus, know what it meant and probably yell about it, which would make her hex him. The whole thing would be a disaster.

"I have a unicorn Patronus," Luna said, casting the spell. It was still see-through, not completely formed, but definitely a unicorn.

"Good job," Ginny said.

Luna sadly said, "It's so normal. I thought it would be more interesting. Perhaps a Pigmy Puff."

Ginny laughed. "Those aren't very interesting. They're just pets. I own one."

"Oh! Do you think I could see him sometime? I'd love to see him excrete a galleon," Luna said eagerly. Ginny just laughed again and assured her friend that she could as soon as she wanted.

"Do you need any help over here?" Hermione asked, joining them. Ginny was glad she'd missed the comment about Pigmy Puffs and galleons. For some reason, the Muggleborn witch always felt the need to try to make Luna understand reason. Ginny had long ago accepted the fact that while her blonde friend didn't exactly see the world the same way other people did, she wouldn't want her to change for anything. In fact, sometimes Ginny wished she could see things a bit more like Luna.

"I'd like help discovering the end of a rainbow," Luna said after a couple seconds thought.

Hermione blinked. "Any help with the Patronus, I meant."

"Oh. No. I'm fine." She saddened. "If boring."

"Luna, you'll always be my least boring friend. I promise," Ginny assured her.

That seemed to appease the Ravenclaw, who wandered over to where Neville was working.

Hermione shook her head at Luna's retreating back before turning to Ginny. "How are you? I haven't seen you in a while."



"I know, but I'm just dandy," Ginny said. "I like your otter."

"It is rather cute, isn't it?" Hermione asked. "I'm glad you brought your friends, by the way. They seem to be enjoying the group."

Ginny smiled as she looked over at where Kerney and Nadine were shooting puffs of silver out of their wands with increasing frustration. Andy was trying to help, but it was clear that Nadine was going to kick him soon if he didn't back off.

"Actually, I should go check on them," Ginny said, waving at Hermione as she wove her way over to her friends.

"I should be able to do this by now," Kerney said.

"It took me nearly a year," Andy said kindly.

"You can conjure a corporeal Patronus?" Nadine asked, turning to stare at him. He nodded and cast the charm. His Patronus was, oddly enough, a giraffe. Ginny was at a loss as to what the connection or hidden meaning was. Kerney and Nadine laughed heartily at the strange pairing of the handsome, sturdy Andy McGrath and this great big, strange-looking animal who bent its long neck to consider Andy more closely before disappearing.

"It was apparently my mum's favorite animals," he said, shrugging. Nadine's gaze softened.

"Where'd you learn to cast it?" Kerney asked, nodding at the dissipating silver.

"My dad," Andy said. Nadine shot him a furtive look before focusing on her wand.

"But he didn't teach your brother?" Ginny asked, glancing over to where Stephen and Nadia were being instructed by Harry. The first few meetings had been terribly amusing, as far as those three were concerned. Stephen had obviously still not gotten over his awe of Harry's Quidditch ability, while Nadia had not been very subtle about her view of Harry as being particularly dishy.

"He was too young," Andy said. "And fairly unwilling to learn."

Harry, not one who was used to such attention before this year when girls started hurling themselves at him, was pretty awkward when confronted with Nadia's attentive behavior. But luckily for Stevie, Harry quickly discovered that the younger McGrath's star-struck reverence was due to Quidditch, not his identity as the Boy-Who-Lived, and became much more easy and comfortable in his presence.

At the moment, it seemed that while Nadia was at least succeeding in producing mist, Stephen was becoming visibly frustrated. Harry was trying to coax him into doing something, and Nadia was cheerfully trying to improve his spirits. Ginny, who was not practicing anyway, went over to see what was going on.

"Hey Nadia, why don't you go show Andy what you can do? I think he'll be impressed." Nadia brightened at the idea and skipped off. Stevie scowled. Then he realized suddenly that the two people in the world he most admired (granted, in different ways) were standing with him. Ginny grinned at how he could not contain his emotions at all.

"What seems to be the problem here?" she asked Harry, glancing back and forth between him and Stevie.

"Stephen's having trouble getting the beginning of a Patronus."

Stevie nodded his head with a pout.

"Well, maybe your memory isn't happy enough," Ginny offered. Harry nodded, and turned to his pupil.

"That's what Harry said," Stevie admitted.

"Try to think of the most powerful memory you have," Harry said. "You can't just remember a time when you were happy, the memory has to affect you now as well."

Stevie looked lost.

"My memory wasn't strong enough the first time," Ginny said. "It was just making the Quidditch team."

From the way Stevie perked up, this was exactly what he had thought of as well. "So what it is now?"

Ginny tensed, but tried to cover it up.

"It's of a time when I thought I was very alone, only to look up and see a very messy friend who made me feel safe and cared for." She paused. "The memory still makes me feel safe."

She glanced at Harry, only to see him watching her closely, kindly. She offered him a small smile.

"But it took me nearly six months to master the charm," Ginny said to Stevie.

"That's so long," Stevie complained, holding out his wand and shutting his eyes tightly. He said the spell, and nothing happened. Clearly frustrated, he looked like he wanted to throw the wand onto the ground.

"You just have to keep practicing," Harry said.

"I don't want to."

"I bet Andy could help you, if you asked," Ginny said, knowing how close the brothers were.

"He thinks of my mum," Stevie grumbled.

Harry looked curious, and before Ginny could signal not to, he asked, "You mum?"

"She died when I was a baby," he said quietly. "I can't really remember her, but Andy can."

Harry rolled his wand between his fingers. "I don't really have any memories of my parents either, but they're my memory as well."

“So how do you think of them?” Stevie asked. Ginny had been surprised that he would feel so comfortable asking such a question, but realized that he could probably relate to Harry on a level few others could.

“People have told me stories. I’ve seen pictures. And I know what they did for me. It’s enough,” Harry said. Ginny thought she might burst from the feelings trying to escape from her body right then, but Stevie nodded and closed his eyes, probably trying to conjure up images of his parents in his mind. As he did, a small smile gradually came over his face.

“Okay, I think I have it,” Stevie said after a few minutes, opening his eyes and jarring Harry and Ginny.

“All right, go on then,” Harry said by way of invitation. Stevie narrowed his eyes in concentration and commenced the appropriate wand movements, yelling, “Expecto Patronum!”

Sure enough, a thick, white mist shot out of the end of his wand. Ginny and Harry clapped and complimented him approvingly.

“Thanks!” he said to them excitedly. “I have to go tell Nadia!”

He rushed off to find his friend. Harry watched Ginny smiling as her eyes followed Stevie around the room.

“I bet he’s a good boyfriend, huh?” he said lightly, and Ginny laughed. It was nice to laugh again, and it was particularly nice to laugh with Harry.

“He’s adorable and good at Quidditch. What more could I want?” Ginny asked, turning her attention to Harry as soon as Stephen had found Nadia, his brother, and the others.

“He’s quite a kid,” Harry said, and on top of the way he was scrutinizing her, Ginny had the impression that he was fishing for something.

"Yeah. I think he's safe from Ron for a while, at least until after the match against Ravenclaw," Ginny said. Harry smiled and nodded knowingly.

"I just wish he had a twin brother, you know? I'd have much less to worry about this season if he did." His gaze strayed over to where the McGraths, the Ryans, and Kerney were alternately chatting and practicing. "I don't suppose your friend Andrew plays, does he?"

"No, he doesn't. He likes it well enough, but I think he'd rather cheer for his brother. Plus, I can't imagine he'd be all that comfortable with the extra attention. He's already traumatized enough with girls throwing themselves at him all the time, I think being a Quidditch superstar would put him over the edge." She smirked as she watched Nadia hanging on him and Nadine looking on disapprovingly.

"It's a shame. If he were half as good as Stephen, I'd sleep better at night. At least Sloper's improved some. And we didn't lose nearly as much ground as I thought we would from Angelina and Alicia leaving school," he said, nodding at her.

"Oh, Harry, was that a subtle compliment?" she joked, pretending to sigh. "Be careful, I might faint from your overwhelming charm." Harry laughed at her sarcasm, and she grinned. Getting Harry to laugh was not exactly an easy task these days.

"So, are you going to show me your Patronus?"

"No," she said.

"Really?" he asked, surprised.

"Nope," she said again.

"Come on," he cajoled.

She shook her head.

"Please?"

“No,” she said, smiling.

“It’s okay if you can’t do it,” he said.

“Are you trying to manipulate me into showing it out of pride?” she asked incredulously. “That’s a dirty trick, Harry.”

“I’m just saying,” he said in a falsely sincere voice, “it’s a difficult spell that you can’t be expected to master at fifteen.”

Luckily, Andy strolled up to them before she could yell at Harry.

“Hey, Harry,” Andy said as he nodded in greeting, and then turned to Ginny. “Whatever you lot said to Stevie, it really helped. Dad’ll be thrilled to know that he has the beginning, at least. He’s been worried about him ever since the Dementors started going haywire.”

“It’s a hard charm to learn for anyone, let alone a thirteen-year-old,” Harry said.

“Yeah. My dad started teaching it to me when I was fourteen, and it took nearly a year,” Andy said. “But I heard you learned it at thirteen.”

Despite having spent years in the wizarding world, Harry always seemed surprised when people knew information about his life or cared about things that he’d done.

“That’s because Harry’s a Defense prodigy,” Ginny jumped in to cover the awkwardness. “Can’t expect that from just anyone.”

“I had a good teacher,” Harry said.

“My dad was a good teacher too, but I have a feeling that if he’d been a Quidditch star like you or my aunt, my brother would’ve listened a bit more,” Andy said ruefully.

Harry looked a bit confused, so Ginny thought she’d enlighten him.

“His aunt was the Gryffindor girl Beater from twenty years ago,” she said.

Harry nodded in understanding, but as Ginny and Andy continued their conversation, Harry's head suddenly jerked up.

"Your aunt was Tracy McGrath?"

Andy nodded. "Tracy Merton, now. You really know your Quidditch history."

"No." Harry smiled. "I mean, I do. But— Your aunt's in a couple of pictures I have of my dad's old Quidditch team."

"Really?" Andy's entire face lit up with interest.

"Yeah," Harry said, nodding. "Small, blonde?"

Andy nodded, grinning. "That's her."

Harry smiled.

"My mum was in that same year. A Gryffindor as well. Christine O'Connell," Andy said.

Harry shook his head. "I don't recognize the name. Only a few pictures were labeled, mainly Quidditch ones."

"We could always look in the library records," Ginny said. "They have pictures from every year since cameras were invented."

This seemed to come as a complete shock to Harry, though both he and Andy looked excited. So when the D.A. adjourned for the night, the three of them made their way together to the library.

## CHAPTER 7

### Blame it on the Rain

Once in the library, Ginny led them to the section with school records and yearbooks.

"I didn't even know this section of the library existed," Harry said, eyes scanning the rows of yearbooks.

"Me neither," Andy said, pulling a book from the shelf.

"You're both ridiculous," Ginny said, moving to sit at the table in front of the shelves.

Andy shrugged, pushing the book back into place. "Why would we care about old books?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said sarcastically as they joined her. "Maybe to look up your parents?"

"Aren't you clever," Andy said sardonically, flipping through the book from his father's seventh year. "We don't really know Aunt Tracy that well. Not nearly as well as my Uncle Will. The only times we've seen her, we went to her house in a Muggle town and had to pretend to be Muggles too because my uncle and cousins didn't know anything about magic."

All of this was news to Ginny, who was very surprised that she didn't know this about one of her closest friends. If it weren't such a taboo question, she would have asked him if his cousins were squibs.

"That's odd," Ginny said at last.

"Yeah," Andy said. "We don't ask."

"Did your dad and mum meet at Hogwarts?" As long as Ginny was learning pieces about his family, she might as well learn everything.



Andy shook his head. "My mum was Aunt Tracy's best mate even before they went to Hogwarts. That was how Dad met her. He was the year ahead of her. Actually, he was Head Boy her sixth year."

"Cool," Ginny said.

"Not as cool as having both your parents as head students like Harry," Andy said, grinning at Harry. "But Dad always said Mum would have misplaced the badge if it were hers."

Harry looked at him questioningly. "How'd you know my mum was Head Girl?"

"It's part of your story," Ginny said. "The legendary James and Lily Potter, resistance fighters and all that." It was weird to think he didn't know.

Andy nodded. "My dad doesn't like to talk about the first war. He's told us loads about my mum, of course, but not much else besides saying he liked your parents a great deal."

Ginny thought that there might be more than a few families who wanted to forget that part of their lives. She knew her mum got upset talking about her brothers, Gideon and Fabian, and the first war was a taboo subject at the Burrow in general.

Andy was obviously still bewildered at his father's behavior, and Ginny had that familiar feeling again—that there was a lot that they didn't know about their parents' generation and what happened during the first war. Her thoughts on Andy's family were cut off as Harry found his parents' year.

"Oh look," he said, nodding at the page Harry had stopped on.

Ginny twisted to see the page as well.

It was a two-page spread devoted to the Gryffindor Quidditch team. According to the caption, James Potter and Tracy McGrath were sixth-years. James, the tallest member of the team, was in the center of the photo, holding a Quaffle. And sure enough, standing on one

end of the lineup was Andy's aunt, smiling adorably and twirling her Beater's bat.

"I have one like this," Harry said. "We could probably find your dad if there was a page for prefects and Head Girl and Boy."

Ginny thought back to the discussion about Prefects at Grimmauld Place the summer before, and recalled something as Harry followed Andy's suggestion.

"Hey, that means we'll see Remus, too. Didn't he say he was the Gryffindor Prefect for their class?"

Harry looked up at her question, and yet another look of realization came over him. He flipped through the pages faster.

Finally he turned to the page they had been searching for, and the two-page spread for the student leaders showed numerous pictures, both candid and posed, of the Heads and various Prefects. One picture, however, caught all three teenagers' attention immediately.

It was one of the largest pictures on the page and showed five students—three boys and two girls—in a room full of boxes. A tall, light-haired bloke was levitating a box full of what appeared to be folded pieces of paper, like notes passed in class. He was smiling broadly at the camera, as if amused that someone would think to take a picture at that moment.

"That's my dad," Andy said, grinning, and Ginny noticed the Head Boy badge on his robes. Ginny looked around for the Head Girl, but her eyes caught on the boy looking at the camera with wide eyes who glanced around the room. The label made her gasp.

"Harry, that's Remus," Ginny said, pointing.

"Professor Lupin?" Andy asked.

"Yeah," she said. She didn't recognize the last boy, Kevin Creggie, who gave a small wave. She read the other two names to see if she knew any of them, and was surprised by both.

“And that’s Professor Wrightman,” Andy said, leaning in.

“She looks almost the same,” Ginny said, looking at the tiny light-haired girl in the black-and-white photo with perfect posture.

“That’s my mum,” Harry said, pointing to the girl beside Wrightman.

Mrs. Potter and her husband were almost as famous as Harry, if for no other reason than that they were the prelude to his story. And everyone knew that they had apparently been spectacular people: Head Boy and Girl, resistance fighters, brilliant, beautiful, young, and powerful. The laughing Lily Evans in this photo reminded Ginny of every photo of the young couple that she had ever seen.

The heading of the photo said “Friendship Appreciation Day,” which apparently was supposed to explain the numerous boxes full of notes surrounding the five students.

“Do you think they were in the same year?” Ginny finally asked aloud. “You mum and Professor Wrightman?”

“They could have been a year apart. My dad’s in the picture, and he was a seventh year,” Andy said, tilting his head to see better before turning to Harry. “Hey, let’s look at the Gryffindor sixth years page.”

Using one hand to hold his place, Harry began flipping to the student photos for each House and year. When he arrived at the page for the sixth-year Gryffindors, he froze. Ginny’s hand clutched his shoulder as she was overwhelmed by what she saw.

Lined up in the same manner as the Quidditch team, the eight Gryffindors grinned out at them.

At the far left of the picture was a beautiful black-haired girl, who looked statuesque and stunning. Next was Andy’s aunt, followed by a tall blonde who was glancing around the room as if she didn’t really care about the photo. Then Andy’s aunt would nudge her, whisper, and she would smile broadly and turn back to the camera.

“That’s your mum,” Harry said with surprising certainty as he pointed to the third girl.

Andy nodded. “She looks young.”

The name in the caption identified her as Christine O’Connell, and Ginny thought she could see a bit of her friend in that girl’s face.

“I like her,” Harry said curiously, eyes trained on the girl.

“From a photo?” Andy asked with a smile.

Harry nodded. “Yeah. Is that weird?”

It was Ginny who answered, “No.”

“Our mums seemed close,” Andy said, nodding at the fourth girl. Lily Evans, alternately laughing and smiling contentedly, and linking arms with Andy’s mum (Christine) and playfully dodging the devastatingly handsome boy on her other side—a bloke Ginny would not have recognized if not for the label. Sirius Black looked more than just two dozen years younger; he was livelier, happier, and cocky. They watched as Sirius placed an elbow on Lily’s shoulder, which she glanced at before flicking. He laughed, and she smiled as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“Oh,” Harry said quietly, scanning the picture, and Ginny grabbed his free hand without thinking.

“That’s Sirius Black?” Andy asked, leaning in. Before the first D.A. meeting, Ginny had told Kerney and Andy about Harry’s godfather to keep them from saying something unintentionally hurtful, and she’d been surprised to learn that Andy already knew something about it from his dad.

“Yeah,” Harry said in a hollow voice before pointing to the boy beside him. “And that’s my dad.”

James Potter was attractive--very attractive--and given the confident pose, he knew it. Next to James Potter was the younger version of

Remus, looking much more comfortable than he had in the Friendship Appreciate Day photo. Peter Pettigrew rounded out the group of eight, but Ginny didn't give him a second thought. This was a happy discovery, the connection between Harry and Andy's parents, and the role Pettigrew had played in unraveling it all had no place in their thoughts tonight.

"And Professor Lupin," Andy said, pointing. "I can't believe I haven't seen him since he taught here."

"Have you seen any of our other Defense professors?" Ginny asked archly.

"No, but I met Lupin a couple of times when I was younger. He shopped at Dad's store, and Dad knew him," Andy said. Well. That was weird but not unexpected, given that they were in the at school at the same time and only a year apart.

"They look like a blast," Ginny said, refocusing on the picture. "All of them."

"Sirius and my mum look like they were so close," Harry said.

"Everyone loved Lily Evans," Ginny said. It was in every story. "That's the one thing no one even argues about."

"Andrew, you're doing it wrong."

"Shut up, Nadine."

"That plant's going to eat your hand!"

"Maybe if you let me alone, it wouldn't!"

"Well, maybe I would, if you'd quit ruining our assignment!"

"You're not even my partner!"

"Well I don't want Kerney to fail just because you're incompetent at Herbology!"

"It's my best class."

"I'm surprised you're still in school, then. Or maybe you just have your legions of fan girls give you their notes."

"I don't use people like you."

"Insufferable git."

"Bossy wench."

"Conceited prat."

"Domineering—"

They were cut off by Ginny and Kerney's simultaneous hexes.

"—tweet tweet," Andy finished, looking perplexed at how the rest of his insult came out. Nadine smirked and opened her mouth to shoot one back at him, pleased with getting the last word.

"Baaaaaa." Nadine's hand flew to cover her mouth in shock. Ginny and Kerney laughed. Kerney leaned over Andy to face her co-conspirator.

"Sheep trump birds," she said.

"Birds fly," Ginny countered.

"Sheep eat birds," Kerney said. "I win."

"Just this round, Scott."

Ginny and Kerney returned to their respective Herbology assignments, followed soon after by Andy and Nadine, who realized that they would not be getting their human voices back before the lesson was over.

Things between the pair had become a little tense since Nadine had seen Olivia Flint saunter up to Andy in the corridor and ask him to go to Hogsmeade. He said no. (Besides liking Nadine, Andy was smart enough to realize that going on a date with Ginny's least favorite girl in their year wouldn't be a good idea, he later told her). But even though he had turned down the invitation (and a couple others), Nadine had gone out afterward and asked Roman Keselica, the Ravenclaw Quidditch player, to Hogsmeade. He had accepted, and now Ginny and Kerney were competing to find the most creative ways to end their sniping.

"So where is Moran taking you tomorrow?" Kerney asked, mouth quirking in her trademark almost-smile. Andy grinned shamelessly.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I don't know. We're meeting by the Fat Lady after breakfast."

"Well maybe if you're really good," Kerney said, "he'll take you to Madam Puddifoot's."

"I can only dream," Ginny mockingly sighed. They all recalled quite vividly the first time Michael Corner had tried to take Ginny there, a horrific experience only made more hilarious by the fact that Harry and Cho had fallen out there on the very next trip to Hogsmeade.

"At least he managed to ask you first and save you from going with that creepy Hufflepuff who asked you," Kerney said.

"Actually," Ginny said, sitting up straighter. "I've decided to have a good attitude about the date."

"Really?" Kerney asked, eyebrows raised.

"Tweet tweet," Andy added doubtfully.

"Duncan's hot. We've always gotten along. He's told me I'm good at Quidditch. And I'm very good at daydreaming while looking like I'm paying attention," she said.

"Tweet," Andy said, rolling his eyes.

“Baa,” Nadine snapped at him.

“I agree with them,” Kerney said, nodding at the pair.

“It’s a free meal,” Ginny said.

“That I can appreciate,” Kerney said, smiling.

With her positive attitude firmly in place, Ginny went to her last class of the week: double Potions with Snape.

“There is a potion on each of your tables. You are to make it more potent by the end of the period,” Snape said, setting the students to task. As most of the students scrambled to uncork their vials and dissect the ingredients, Devon and Ginny cleaned their work area and created seven separate sterile environments. They’d spent the last few weeks reviewing this process; a methodical approach would be best.

In fact, halfway through the lesson, they were doing so well that Devon started a rather surprising conversation.

“Honestly, Ginny. Duncan Moran?” the usually reserved Slytherin bluntly inquired.

“What about him?” Ginny asked, picking the eel skin out of her area with a pair of tongs.

“Why are you going to Hogsmeade with him?”

“He’s dishy, nice, and asked me first,” Ginny said, nearly convinced that this would be a fine time. She turned back to the work in front of her, the thought breezing through the back of her mind that it was time to mince the antelope antler shavings for the sobering draught they were brewing. Devon began measuring the required amount of Tequila for the mixture.

“He’s dull,” Devon said.



"And I'm not. We'll balance each other out," Ginny said easily. This positive attitude thing was working wonderfully.

"You could do better." Devon said. Ginny silently wondered how, choosing to ignore the part of her brain that immediately volunteered Harry's name. "You're out of his league."

Ginny almost laughed in disbelief.

"Nearly every girl in the school would die to go out with him," Ginny said. "How am I out of his league?"

"He's an arrogant half-blood," Devon said evenly.

Ginny recoiled.

"That doesn't matter to me," Ginny said, shocked by her friend's words. "Does it to you?"

"You could do better," Devon said simply.

"Blood doesn't matter to me," she said again.

"Why do you ignore your other options?"

"Like who? I'm not interested in any of the other blokes who asked me." This conversation had taken such a strange turn that Ginny had to remind herself to add the tequila to the potion slowly.

"Well, you could date your friend Andrew McGrath, for one. Quentin. Roman Keselica. Theodore Nott. Even Harry Potter would be a more deserving match, though he's no pureblood." Ginny couldn't protest before Devon said, "And of course Baron Ramsey."

"Baron Ramsey is the Head Boy," Ginny said. "And the eldest son in one of the most respected families in England. I hardly think he's going to consider dating a fifth year Gryffindor." Ginny covered the potion briefly. "For that matter, most of the others you mentioned wouldn't either."

“They’re suitable for you.”

Ginny decided that Devon was too serious to be dissuaded, and settled on asking, “I’ll keep those blokes in mind for the next Hogsmeade weekend, then.”

“Obviously Andrew isn’t an option because he’s only ever going to love Nadine Ryan. Roman’s sister would be intolerable after a week. Theo’s family would pose a problem for you.” She stirred the potion three times counter-clockwise. “If Quentin wasn’t utterly asexual, I’d say he would be an excellent choice.”

Merlin, she was actually serious about this.

“But Harry Potter and Baron Ramsey would be good matches,” Devon continued, nodding towards Ginny’s meticulously cut potions supplies.

“Thanks, but until they ask me out, I think I’ll settle for blokes like Duncan,” she said, scooping the peeled beetles into her hand to deposit in the potion.

“That’s ridiculous,” Devon said shortly, shaking her head. “Settling is for commoners.”

“What the hell do you think I am? Royalty?” Ginny asked with a laugh, wiping off her hands. “If you haven’t heard the jibes Malfoy constantly spouts, you’d know that I’m about as common as they come.”

“You’re the only remaining Prewett witch. You have six brothers who have become very successful. You have close ties to Headmaster Dumbledore and Harry Potter,” Devon said, levitating two unicorn hairs halfway into the potion. It turned light purple, and Ginny knew it was done.

“So all that means Baron and Harry are my only options?” Ginny asked as she sealed the potion.

“They’d suit you well. They’re passionate,” she had said, and the conversation stopped.

“Passionate isn’t the first word that comes to mind when I think of Baron,” Ginny said drolly.

“It isn’t?”

“No.” Intense was.

For the rest of the day, the thought of dating—even kissing—Baron Ramsey threatened to send Ginny into bursts of laughter whenever it occurred to her.

Not that he was unattractive. On the contrary, he was extremely handsome; plus, Ginny had recently decided that with his rich, black hair, wonderfully Quidditch-sculpted shoulders, and aristocratic air, he was probably the most eligible bachelor to a lot of Slytherin girls. The thought actually made him a bit more appealing.

Of course, entertaining the far-fetched notion of being the Head Boy’s girlfriend did not mean her attraction to Harry had diminished at all (indeed, following her latest dream, it had increased ten-fold). After Michael last year, she had decided that it was stupid to date other people when she was infatuated with Harry, but the more she thought about the blokes who had asked her to Hogsmeade, the more she realized that she could not live in a non-dating cocoon her whole life. Either he would come around or he wouldn’t. She couldn’t force him.

It wasn’t as if she was any more likely to get a date with a boy of his stature than with Mr. Savior himself.

Even though Harry was physically at school, his mind was clearly elsewhere. Oh, he went to class, lessons, and Quidditch practices (where he seemed most alive), but something in his eyes had changed recently. Ginny had wondered how much time he spent thinking about 1947 and the young man that Tom Riddle had once been.

With thoughts of dates and preoccupied saviors running through her head, Ginny slipped away from her mates after Potions and headed down to the Quidditch pitch. Friday afternoons were the perfect time

to fly alone, as no one seemed particularly anxious to schedule a team practice during that time.

Retro in hand, Ginny kicked off the ground and launched into the clouds. As winter approached, the days grew shorter, and the sun was already tipping off toward the horizon. With the sky splashed light pink and blue, the day felt softer and more welcoming.

Then a bloke on a very fast broom spiraled around her in the air, and the serenity was replaced with competition.

"Think you're something special, do you, Potter?" Ginny called out with a smile.

He stopped abruptly, a dozen meters above and in front of her. "That's Captain Potter to you, Weasley."

She laughed. "We just call you Slave Driver behind your back."

"I wouldn't have to run the team so ragged if everyone would give up their Friday nights to practice."

She glided up, circling him. "I know this may come as a shock, but some people like to have fun on the ground."

Harry looked up at the sky, as relaxed as Ginny had ever seen him. "Fools."

"One of those fools is your best mate Hermione," Ginny pointed out. They were speeding together now toward the end of the pitch.

"She's coming around," he said, which just made Ginny laugh. They spent an hour like that, as they had so often at Spinner's End, flying circles, doing dives, trying to shock the other into giving up.

They flew until the sun set and dusk disappeared, and the pitch remained silent under glittering stars. They flew despite the new moon, and curfew.

They flew until they were so tired that they landed on the Gryffindor stands, high in the air, and rested on the benches, waiting to feel at peace.

“You’re lucky you have the best Chasers in school,” Ginny said, lying back on the bench, one arm under her head. “You’d never be able to find the Snitch flying like that.”

He chuckled tiredly. “I’m captain. I’m given the credit for the win no matter how it’s received.”

Ginny smiled to herself, closing her eyes in the dark.

“I’ll always get the credit,” Harry muttered quietly. His tone surprised Ginny, who peeked one eye open, only to find that she could see better in the darkness now.

“You sound a bit self-pitying,” Ginny said. “Would you like me to throw you a pity party?”

“No, thanks,” he said, a wry smile on his lips. They watched the stars together, and the twinkling lights of the castle. A pair of ghosts floated just about the southeast tower. “I miss flying like this.”

“Me, too.” They flew three times a week for Quidditch, but it wasn’t the same.

“Riddle never liked flying,” Harry said. “Considered it a pastime for commoners.”

The words reminded Ginny uncomfortably of Devon. “He had a lot of crazy ideas.”

Harry nodded, eyes still watching the ancient castle that had housed so many students. “Do you remember how you told me I wasn’t anything like Riddle?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

"I think about that a lot," Harry said, uncharacteristically in a sharing mood. "Because I have to think like him to accomplish what I have to do, and I'm good at it, knowing how he works. We have a lot in common. Orphans. Half-bloods. Eager to prove ourselves. But what you said about he and I being different keeps me sane sometimes."

The night was still and silent but for his quiet words.

Harry shook himself, and looked over at her. "We have brother wands, you know, Voldemort and I."

Brother wands were a myth, Ginny thought. But he was Harry Potter. His whole life was a legend.

"And the dreams I had last year, of killing a gardener and biting your father, were visions from his own head," Harry said. "It was hard to tell where I stopped and he began."

Ginny smiled grimly. "Well, that's something I can understand."

"I know," Harry said, eyes lingering on her face for a moment. "Ron thinks that I'm mad to say I have any part of Voldemort in me. Hermione's researching it in the library. But I can't imagine that books could explain this feeling."

"No. Probably not," Ginny admitted, thinking of the summer after her first year, when she would wake up in the night having had such an intense dream that she couldn't be sure if it were a memory, a vision, or nothing at all. Where her memory stopped and Tom Riddle's began, she couldn't tell. But soon she had learned to avoid those memories, hide them, and they'd come less frequently. The memories had blurred.

"There was a prophecy. Made when I was a baby," Harry said at length. "It was why Voldemort wanted me in the Department of Mysteries, to retrieve it. It said that I would be marked as his equal, have a power he knows not, and that neither of us could live while the other survived."

He said it in a bit of a rush, as if he needed to say it quickly or he wouldn't say it at all. He was clearly making an effort, and Ginny was grateful.

"Well that seems vague and unhelpful," Ginny said.

Harry laughed. "Hermione, Ron, and Professor Dumbledore are all helping me figure it out."

"Is your scar the part about marking you as his equal?" Ginny asked, glancing at the famous lightening bolt scar.

Harry lightly traced it with his finger. "Probably."

Ginny nodded. "And do you know what the power he knows not is?"

"Love." The moment she heard the word, Ginny knew it was true, and nodded. Tom had never understood love, not for a teacher, a school, friends, or family. He only knew and respected power. But love? The thing that brought Harry to the Department of Mysteries and led all his friends to join him? No, Tom wouldn't understand that at all.

"You have to kill him, don't you?" Ginny asked, realizing it with a jolt. "It isn't just that you feel you ought to, but now you've been told it's your job."

Harry nodded.

"Well, prophecies are never ironclad," Ginny said. "They're more like guidelines, really. And nothing in yours says you have to do it alone. So just let us all help you."

Genuine surprise shown on his features. "I thought you'd want to stay as far away from me as possible. It's partly why I told you."

She was stung, but hid it. "You wanted me to stay away?"

"No," he said quickly. "I just thought you had a right to know. Especially with the dreams and--"

“Well, now I know. And we can just carry on being friends.”

“But—”

“But I’m a better flier than you, and it’s a bit embarrassing?” she asked, cutting him off. “I know. We’ll have to work through that.”

That ended that particular conversation, much to Harry’s evident relief. He was a fool to think she would react any differently. Even if he and Tom Riddle shared a lot—and they did, she knew it—that just made her want to stick to Harry even more closely. Because he was what Tom could have been, had he not been completely evil. Harry gave Ginny hope that her eleven-year-old self hadn’t been completely warped. Sure, she had fallen for a sociopath in a diary, but she had fallen for Harry at the same time. And he hadn’t let her down yet. She would be damned if she let him down first.

The Saturday of the trip to Hogsmeade dawned, and all the students’ hopes for a nice day were dashed, as rolls of thunder and flashes of lightning woke them up for breakfast.

Ginny wasn’t quite sure how she felt about this date. Duncan was a good enough bloke, and they were friends, and he was one of the best looking blokes in the school, but she just couldn’t get excited about spending the day with him. Frankly, she would rather spend the day sleeping or people-watching with Kerney, Andy, and Luna. Or talking about Quidditch with Roman and Jamie. Or any number of things, really.

Yawning, after magically concealing the dark circles under her eyes, Ginny went out through the portrait hole to find Duncan waiting for her. She had to admit that he did have a wonderful smile, and was glad that it had the effect of putting her at ease.

“You look nice,” he said, making her smile.

“Thank you.”

They walked down to the village, under a large umbrella that Duncan had brought, and chatted about O.W.L.’s and N.E.W.T.’s. They had



just broached the subject of Quidditch and Duncan's little sister playing for the house team when they reached Hogsmeade. Halting their conversation for lengthy stops in Honeydukes and Quality Quidditch Supplies, they didn't pick their topic up again until they headed to the Three Broomsticks for lunch and some butterbeer.

The Three Broomsticks was more crowded than usual, due to the rain, but Duncan had the kind of sway among the students that could almost instantly clear a small booth out for them to sit down. When Duncan asked her what she wanted to drink, Ginny volunteered to get their order from the bar. After Duncan indicated he wanted the usual—butterbeer—Ginny made her way over to Madam Rosmerta at the bar.

"Ginny!" the handsome, middle-aged proprietor greeted her. Ginny smiled.

"Hello, Madam Rosmerta," she replied cheerfully. The famous Rosmerta had a soft spot for Fred and George that extended down the Weasley line to Ginny, perhaps more so because the barmaid had known all of her brothers and knew that she was the only girl of seven. Madam Rosmerta glanced in the direction from which Ginny had come.

"Doing well for yourself, missy," she commented with a smirk, recognizing Duncan Moran. Ginny grinned ruefully, making Rosmerta chuckle as she made up two butterbeers without being asked.

"It's just a first date," Ginny said.

"That's what you said about that brown-haired boy last year."

"Who's now dating Cho Chang," Ginny noted. Setting the two mugs of butterbeer on the counter, Rosmerta smiled somewhat conspiratorially. She leaned in to whisper, and Ginny followed suit.

"Well, this one's charming enough," she began, followed by a subtle but meaningful glance toward the door. "Unless you're looking for someone more heroic." Her eyes had followed Rosmerta's

meaningful glance, they had landed on the solitary figure of Harry Potter entering the pub.

“Right,” Ginny said, mentally shaking her head. Harry and she seemed to be venturing more towards friends than anything else, and while secretly happy about that progress, it wasn’t exactly love just yet. “Well, we’ll be having lunch as well drinks. Thanks, Madam Rosmerta.” And without meeting the bartender’s eyes, she collected the butterbeers and walked back to the table she shared with Duncan. She plastered a smile on her face and tried not to think about Harry.

But really, she thought. How in the world was she supposed to continue on a date with this bloke when she kept thinking about another one?

Because, she reminded herself, I can’t spend my entire life pining away for something that might not happen.

Yet she couldn’t help thinking about Harry. When she did look up to find him, she saw that he had been stopped in the middle of the pub by Stephen and Nadia, who were enjoying the excitement of their first-ever trip to Hogsmeade.

Stevie’s eyes caught Ginny’s and he waved at her happily, causing Harry and Nadia to turn their attention toward her as well. Nadia beamed and waved, and relief seemed to wash over Harry’s countenance. Ginny smiled and waved back, and then returned her attention to her date.

“So, how’s my sister working out?” he asked, to restart their conversation where they had left off. Ginny smiled; she was very fond of Betsy Moran.

“She’s doing very well. She just needs experience, is all. It’s kind of hard to gauge her progress right now with this ridiculous weather,” Ginny replied, with a nod toward the window. They had reached the subject of next week’s match against Ravenclaw, when a shadow fell across the edge of the table. Ginny glanced up to see whom it was, and nearly spit out a mouth full of butterbeer when she saw Harry.

“Hey, Ginny, Duncan,” he greeted them. He still had that relieved look on his face as he sat down in the booth next to Ginny, who, embarrassingly, had suddenly grown quite warm. She croaked a “hello” and promptly drained her butterbeer.

“How’s it going, mate?” Duncan asked cheerfully. “Think these storms will break before the match next week?”

As Harry and Duncan launched into a discussion about Quidditch and Gryffindor’s chances against Ravenclaw, Ginny was mentally giving herself the what-for.

Why was he making her so nervous? What the hell was going on? Was it because she was already discombobulated about being on a date with a boy she didn’t fancy? Was it Rosmerta’s (and Devon’s) comments? It wasn’t like she had been in denial about her feelings for Harry—she’d owned up to them (to herself, if not to anyone else) a long time ago.

So why was she so self-conscious all of a sudden?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Madam Rosmerta coming to take their order for lunch. Duncan ordered Yorkshire pudding.

“I’ll have fish and chips, please,” Ginny added.

“Same here,” Harry chimed in. He eyed Ginny’s empty butterbeer. “And two more butterbeers, please.” As Madam Rosmerta smiled and left to fill their orders, Duncan glanced at Ginny suspiciously and then looked at Harry with confusion.

“Harry, mate, I know you’re the Boy-Who-Lived, and all, but even you can’t just run over a bloke’s date like this,” he said, sort of joking—but sort of not. Harry and Ginny both froze and immediately gaped at Duncan. Their parallel actions continued as deep red blushes crept up both of their countenances.

“Ah . . . date?” He chanced a glance at Ginny, whose eyes were still wide. She bit her lip in discomfort. Harry gulped and turned back to the older boy. “You’re on a date?”

"I asked Ginny to come with me to Hogsmeade, and she said yes. We have been spending the day together to the exclusion of all our other friends," Duncan explained patronizingly. Ginny's brow furrowed at his condescension—it didn't take much to know that Harry was inept when it came to relationships, and she didn't appreciate Duncan making him feel worse about it. It's not like it was his fault he wasn't a normal kid. "That's usually called a 'date,'" Duncan concluded. Harry was reddening more by the second.

"Oh. I didn't, er, know that Ginny had a date today." He turned to her, but didn't look her in the eye. "I just saw you, and thought--" Ginny was feeling too much embarrassment on Harry's behalf to think anything of the fact that her brother had disappeared again. "I'll just go then." He glanced at Duncan one last time. "Sorry." And with that he started toward the door.

Ginny shot Duncan a look that would have stopped a charging rhino in its tracks, and went after him.

"Harry!" she shouted across the bar. He hesitated mid-step, but kept walking. "Harry!" she shouted, more insistently this time. He stopped a few feet from the door, but didn't turn around. Ginny walked around to face him, though he refused to look at her.

"Harry, I'm so sorry. I can't believe the git actually said that."

Harry shrugged noncommittally, in a way that made Ginny believe he was just trying to get through the conversation as quickly as possible and get the hell out of there. She leaned in and whispered in his ear.

"I'm actually really glad you showed up," she added, and to this he froze again and chanced a look at her. She smiled at her progress. "Because I was having sort of a miserable time." Harry cracked a smile and turned his head to glance in the direction of their table, where Duncan was watching something out the window.

"I really am sorry, Ginny. I honestly didn't know," he explained again.

Ginny's countenance softened. "Don't worry about it. Just wanted to say sorry about Duncan."

He shrugged. "I have to go find—"

"Yeah," she said, nodding at this awkward goodbye. After such a good conversation the night before, him walking away like this felt like a dozen steps backward in their relationship. But there was nothing Ginny could think to say to change that.

"Why'd you take off like that?" Duncan asked when she returned to the table.

"I don't know. Maybe because you were belittling and rude to one of my friends?" Ginny said sarcastically.

"He's the one that interrupted our lunch."

"Not on purpose!"

"He's Harry Potter," Duncan said. "He'll be fine."

"What's the supposed to mean?"

"It means that every girl at Hogwarts wants to date him. I'm sure he won't be alone for long," Duncan said, settling back into his seat. Ginny liked to think that she knew a lot about blokes after living with six of them, but Duncan's gall surprised her. The thought of eating an entire meal with him did not make her happy.

"You know, Duncan, I'm suddenly very tired," Ginny said evenly. "I think I'll go back to the castle."

Despite his protests, she stood; alone and without his umbrella, she slipped through the students packed into the bar.

"Wow. That was quite a tantrum you just threw," said an unfamiliar voice as Ginny put a hand on the door. She turned to see a tall, lanky bloke leaning against the wall, butterbeer in hand and an amused

smirk on his face. Ginny didn't think she had ever spoken to him before, but he was looking right at her, clearly talking to her.

"Probably would have been better if I had hexed him," she replied, remembering the bloke's name only after she walked out the door: Theodore Nott.

For nine days before Gryffindor's first Quidditch match of the year, it rained. And stormed. And did anything other than be sunny and pleasant. On the tenth day, however, Mother Nature seemed to be inclined to compensate for it all in one day. By the time Ginny went down to breakfast at 9:30, it was already 77 degrees outside. By 10:00 it was 85. And it kept climbing. There was not a cloud in the sky.

Filled to the brim with students breakfasting in anticipation of the match, the Great Hall was hot and stuffy. Professor Flitwick was going spare trying to adjust the school's cooling charms to meet the pace of the uncharacteristic heat wave that seemed to be hitting the area.

As she sat at the Gryffindor table, surrounded by the usual line-up of fifth years in their usual spots—Andy and Nadine on either side of her, Kerney directly across, Artemis and Colin on either side of the Kernel—Ginny peered around her housemates to gauge the status of each of her teammates. Harry and Ron were quietly murmuring responses to Hermione, with the former picking at his food while the latter ate more than enough for both of them. But then, she knew Harry never ate much before a match.

It looked like Hermione was forcing him to hydrate himself, though. For once, Ginny was thankful that Hermione was a nagger. While as Keeper Ron probably wouldn't have much issue with the heat, the rest of them would need to hydrate as much as possible before the match. Ginny herself had already gotten through five glasses of pumpkin juice and was nearly done with her sixth.

"Are you trying to make yourself sick for the game?" Kerney asked, glancing at the food piled in front of Ginny, who smiled and killed the remaining juice in her glass.

“Being thirsty in the middle of a game is worse than being too full at the start,” Ginny said, though that wasn’t true at all. But Charlie had trained her to eat well before a competition, and some habits were hard to break.

“Ginny!” Betsy Moran said, bouncing up to her alongside Katie Bell. “We should head down now, shouldn’t we?”

Katie smiled at the girl’s enthusiasm, and Ginny joined her fellow Chasers on their way to the pitch. Katie stopped by Harry to whisper something in his ear, to which he glanced at Ginny and Besty, then nodded.

It was just as hot outside as inside.

“Nervous?” Katie asked as they left the stone steps.

“Never,” Ginny replied automatically. Another habit from her brothers: never admit nerves, even to yourself.

“Really?” Betsy asked, still jittery. “Katie’s been doing this for six years, but this is just your second year, right? Shouldn’t you be nervous? I am.”

“We’re very good,” Ginny said. “We’ll be okay.”

“Ravenclaw’s brilliant, though,” Betsy said. “And ravens are their symbol, even, and I just—”

“Griffins can fly, too,” Katie said smilingly.

“And what’s more,” Ginny said, leaning toward the younger girl, “griffins eat little ravens for breakfast.”

Betsy cracked up nervously, only to settle and say, “Mum says I need to calm down. She always does deep breathing techniques before games.”

“Since she is one of the best Quidditch players in the league right now, I think listening to her advice might be helpful,” Katie said.

Everyone knew how horrendously Ginny's date with Duncan had gone, though no one knew the details. Most blamed him, which made Ginny sort of happy. Betsy had been the most broken up about her brother's date with Ginny going poorly, but she and Ginny didn't mention it to one another, and everything was fine now.

"You think we should use that three stacked attack Harry designed on Tuesday?" Ginny asked Katie after they had all changed into their Quidditch robes. Katie was stretching on the locker room floor.

"Only if the Beaters try to railroad Betsy," Katie said. The younger girl had run to the loo. "She's at her best flying out of formation. Those crazy turns are going to draw attention and confuse the Ravensclaws for sure."

They talked strategy until the entire team was there. Stevie and Jack seemed just as keyed up as Betsy, and the three formed a nervous group together. Ginny couldn't quite think of a way to calm their nerves.

Luckily, Harry's inspirational speech was good, though Ginny could hardly listen to it; instead, she stared at him, at Harry Potter, who looked transformed as he stood in front of them, telling them that they could do well, that they were seamless. Harry Potter, who looked older than just sixteen when he said that he believed in them, thought they could do this with their eyes closed. Harry Potter, who could have spent his whole life flying if the world had been just a little kinder.

"Any questions?" he asked after speaking to them. No one said a word.

Ginny was itching to get on the field. She could feel Katie's excitement next to her, and Stephen was practically humming with energy.

Following Harry's lead, they all put their hands in for a cheer. Harry gave the one-two-three and they shouted, "Lions!" and lined up to walk out onto the pitch.



Twenty minutes into the game, Ginny could barely sit up straight on her broom. Her robes were drenched with sweat, and even her Retro seemed to feel sluggish in the overpowering heat. She looked and felt like she had just jumped in the lake. Except, she thought bitterly as she caught the Quaffle, drew a defender, and passed it of to an overlapping Katie Bell, the lake would be much cooler than this.

She was not alone. Every player on both teams was sagging. The sun was blazing down, and Dumbledore and McGonagall had conjured tarps over the spectators in the stands. Ginny sent them a jealous glare as she accelerated past Haven Tidmarsh to catch the leading pass Betsy had sent her way.

Five minutes later, Ginny was getting dizzy and Betsy Moran nearly fell off her broom. Luckily she caught herself, but that seemed to be the last straw for Harry, who promptly called timeout. They were leading 20 to 0.

“Catch the Snitch already,” Ron said to Harry as they landed, wiping his brow with the back of his hand.

“It hasn’t made a single appearance,” Harry said, looking over the team, who were all drenched in sweat. “Cast drying charms on your gloves. All of your brooms will hold. Ron, can you go run and find Hermione?”

Ron nodded and ran off. It was a wonder to Ginny that he didn’t even question the order. If Harry wanted Hermione there, Ron seemed to understand that it’d be good for the team.

“How are you holding up, Jack? Stephen?” Harry asked.

“They’re strong,” Jack said, clearly talking about the opposing team’s Beaters.

“You’re faster. The pair of you are the quickest Beaters in school. Dodge, dip, duck, dive, and... dodge,” Harry said with a smile. “They won’t be able to keep up.”

Hermione and Ron came running back, catching Harry’s eye.

"We need Cooling Charms," Harry said, and Hermione nodded and set to work. She was only a sixth year, and Ginny and the rest of the players certainly could have cast them on themselves, but Harry had asked for Hermione. She was the one he trusted. So she was the one that went quickly through the group while they talked strategy. The moment her wand touched Ginny's shoulder, it felt ten degrees cooler.

"It won't save you from sunburn," Hermione cautioned when she was done.

"That's fine. Thanks, Hermione," Harry said as Hooch blew the whistle and they kicked off back into the air.

It was a whole different match.

The Ravenclaw team must have done something similar to the Cooling Charms because both teams flew faster and picked up the tempo of the game considerably. It was still outrageously hot, but not impossibly so.

Her Retro seemed to sense her increased energy, and came alive. She was the fastest flier on the field and could cut and change direction on a dime. And she fully exploited her advantage. Her obvious skill with a broom drew the attention of the Ravenclaw Beaters, as well as their Chasers, leaving Betsy, and to a lesser extent, Katie, almost completely free to move the Quaffle.

By the time Harry caught the Snitch, Ginny had not scored since she put in the opening goal two minutes into the match. But Betsy had scored six, and Katie had added four. They won by a score of 260-90.

But the highlight of the game, by far, was when a smiling Harry jumped off his broom after catching the Snitch, ran past Cho Chang without a second glance, and wrapped up Ginny in a sweaty, disgusting hug.

But he was the captain, and had a dozen other people to hug, and so did she. After exchanging hugs and smiles and congratulations with the rest of her teammates, Ginny stood on the pitch watching her

team and her housemates chattering happily and replaying the game. She was just thinking about how content she was when she heard someone clear his throat behind her. She turned around to find Baron Ramsey standing in his full school uniform; even without his robes, she wondered how he hadn't already passed out from heat stroke—the match had taken over three hours. She smiled.

"You played well," he said.

"Thank you," she replied cheerfully. "I wish I'd scored more."

"You distracted the Beaters, giving your teammates that opportunity," he said.

"And I'll have a couple of bruises to prove it," she said, rotating her shoulder where the Bludger had hit her moments before the end of the game. It had come from behind, and she just hadn't seen it.

"You took advantage of Roman's left side," he said.

"It's not my fault he let everyone know about his wrist being broken two days ago," she said, shrugging innocently. Here the Head Boy actually did smile, which transformed his already handsome face. He was freaking gorgeous. She had never seen him smile before. Why the hell didn't he do it more often?

"Well, congratulations on your victory," he said, glancing over her shoulder. His beautiful, smiling face fell back into its usual demeanor. "I should probably leave you to celebrate with your team." Ginny thought that he was leaving rather abruptly, but when she turned to look over her shoulder, she saw why. Ron was glaring daggers at them, and most of the people on the pitch were glancing at them. Ginny rolled her eyes as she turned back to Baron.

"Oh, don't bother with them. I can talk to you if I want. They're just idiots." She shrugged off her disgusting robes and picked up her broom. "Come on," she said, smiling kindly at him. "Walk me back to the locker room." And he did.

Author's Note: Hope you enjoyed this. Again, my beta is keeping me on my toes and helping me work through the chapters, so I hope to have eight up within the week. But your comments would really help me to structure the story. A favorite character of mine peeked in this chapter, and I can't wait to have more of that. Feel free to review if you have any questions. I enjoy them. Thank you to all the wonderful people who have reviewed so far. – Miranda

## CHAPTER 8

### Lurking in Shadows

It was fairly early in the afternoon, but Ginny was sitting alone in the library, distracted from the textbooks in front of her by a picture that was supposed to be tucked away in her private notebook. It was a group picture they had taken during the D.A. meeting that night. She studied it, almost like she was memorizing it, as if she knew it would soon be taken away and wanted it clearly imprinted in her mind forever.

"There you are, Ginny," said a voice to Ginny's right, startling her into sliding the picture under her book, despite knowing it was charmed to obscure. She need not have bothered, though; it was just Andy and Luna.

"We wanted you to study with us, but you weren't hiding in any closets or stuck in any stairs," Luna said. "So it was difficult to ask."

"And here I am in the most boring place," Ginny said. "I hope you aren't too disappointed."

"You are pretty lame," Andy said as they filled two of the three empty seats at her table. Their books and bags were soon sprawled out.

"Is that the D.A. picture?" Luna asked, pointing.

Ginny glanced around, but no one else was near enough to hear her. "Yeah, it is."

"I like the photo, but it does seem weird to take a picture of a secret club," Andy said, peeking at the photo in Ginny's hands; they each had a copy, spelled to appear to be a stray bit of parchment to anyone not in it.

"It was a bonding moment," Ginny said, waving it off. "After the war, we'll use it as our Christmas cards."

“And a record in case we die,” Luna said, drawing circles on the edge of the essay she had pulled out to work on.

“That’s morbid,” Ginny said, studying the faces of her friends.

“Probably true, though,” Andy said, arranging his books in a large stack.

“Death comes to everyone,” Luna said lightly. “Then the whispers we hear beyond the veil are the living, waiting to join us.”

Andy grew quiet as he traced his quill across his empty parchment. Like Ginny, he had an appreciation for Luna that many in their year did not share. It was part of the reason why he and Ginny had remained good friends for such a long time: he’d already been quite grown up by the time he came to Hogwarts, having dealt with his mother’s death, and after her first year, Ginny gravitated toward his maturity.

“Stevie’s spell is interesting,” Andy said, refocusing on the image.

“It adds a little flavor to the photo,” Ginny noted, glancing at the light blue spell streak out of the frame while Stevie’s eyes grew wide and Nadia laughed delightedly.

While she took pleasure in reviewing the entire group of students who had united behind Harry to form Dumbledore’s Army, Ginny’s eyes settled on the center of the photo, where she sat smiling between Luna and Andy.

“I’m glad you joined the D.A. this year,” Ginny said.

“Me, too,” Andy said, smiling as he stretched out his right arm. “The bruises are a blast.”

Ginny laughed and quoted from the Auror training books, “Pain is the feeling of weakness leaving your body.”

“That’s sick,” Andy said.

"I like bruises. Like ripples from a pebble on your skin," Luna said as she ended her history essay with a flourish. She always signed her essays at the bottom.

With their last exams before the Christmas holiday coming up this week, it probably would have been a very good idea for Ginny to study with them. They had their Potions review with Devon in two days, and she really did need to go over the Herbology notes.

"Hello, Baron. Hello, Gretchen," Luna said suddenly, shocking Ginny out of her thoughts. Andy and she turned to see the Head Boy walking by with his sister.

"Luna," Baron said, nodding at her.

"Hello," Gretchen Ramsey said, eyes roaming the table and settling on Ginny for a bit longer than the others. She was tall with dark hair and light green eyes.

"I don't suppose you'll be going to Black and White Ball this year, Luna?" Baron asked after a pause.

"No. Father and I are going to America to see if we can find dinosaurs," Luna said happily. Ginny had no idea what the girl was talking about, but that happened a lot.

"That's a shame," Gretchen said. "It would be nice to have other young people there."

"Cousin Christian's wife is pregnant. You could talk to the baby in her stomach," Luna offered, forcing Ginny to cover her mouth with her hand to keep from appearing rude as she stifled her laugh. Andy smiled at the image of Gretchen Ramsey—hair done up and dress robes glittering—speaking to a woman's stomach.

"I think I'll settle for talking to Theodore," Gretchen said with a light smile, glancing ever so subtly at Andy. "I think he said he's attending."

Andy twirled his quill around a finger, his elbow on the table.

“And what are your holiday plans, Ginevra?” Baron asked, forcing her to twist in her seat to face him properly. Gretchen looked on curiously.

“Family stuff,” she said easily. “Two weeks evens out to about two days for each member of my family.”

“Don’t forget to practice your flying,” Baron said, the corners of his mouth tilting up. “I want a challenge in our match.”

Ginny’s smile grew. “I think I can handle that.”

He inclined his head. “Have a nice break, Ginevra.”

“Thanks, Baron. You too,” Ginny said. “And you too, Gretchen.”

“Thank you,” his twin said, and the two walked away to a table hidden behind the shelves of books.

Almost before they were out of sight, Luna said, “Baron Ramsey was flirting with you.”

Rolling her eyes, Ginny said, “We were talking about Quidditch.”

Luna nodded. “Flirtatiously.”

Ginny looked to Andy for help. He shook his head and waved off responding. “You’re a big help.”

“His sister thought so too. She was watching for signs,” Luna said.

“He stopped by to say hi to you, not me,” Ginny pointed out.

“I was an excuse.”

“Well, even if we were, I don’t think either of us is particularly serious about it.”

Growing up with six brothers had made Ginny feel very comfortable around blokes; she understood them most of the time. With girls, she



was always a bit more lost. Sometimes, Ginny even had trouble understanding Kerney, her closest girl friend, but Luna was generally the exception to this rule, as she wasn't quite like anyone else, so this conversation was throwing Ginny for a loop.

"McGrath!" called a bloke from the doorway. Madam Pince was in the back, luckily, so Dean Thomas didn't get in trouble for being so loud as he jogged up next to Ginny.

"Hey, Dean, what's up?" Andy asked, leaning back in his chair.

"We need a fourth man," Dean said, nodding at the door where Seamus and a Ravenclaw named Greg were waiting impatiently. "You up for it?"

Andy was already packing all his stuff away and standing.

"What do you need him for?" Ginny asked casually, rolling her head back to look at him.

Dean wrapped an arm around her shoulder and whispered, "Bloke stuff. Top secret."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Have fun."

"Always," Andy said, waving and following the older boys out of the library. Strange as it seemed, Andy had always been friends with the boys in the year above them. He was forever disappearing with Dean and Seamus. Another sad side effect of growing up with her brothers was that despite Luna being one of her closest girl friends, Ginny would have gone with Andy in a moment if she had been asked.

"Franny Gramci asked Andy out this morning," Luna said.

Ginny's mouth fell open. "That's ridiculous. Christmas break starts in a couple of days, when was this date supposed to take place?"

"Not before he fell out of love with Nadine," Luna said, none-too-quietly.

"The girls at this school live in denial of that fact," Ginny said.

"It must be a nice place for so many to live there."

"Franny's a Hufflepuff, right?" Ginny asked, and Luna nodded. "I bet on Hufflepuff as the next asker."

"But you guessed that it would be a seventh year," Luna pointed out, pulling a spool of light blue ribbon from her bag and measuring it out. "Franny's a fourth."

"Half a correct answer is better than completely wrong."

"You said half right is all wrong when Kerney had a partial answer," Luna said, sticking her wand behind her ear after cutting the ribbon.

That sounded like something she might say. Darn.

"We should just give the money to Nadine for alcohol because if she hears about Franny, she'll go nuts," Ginny said, crossing her arms over her book.

"Or she'll ask Roman Keselica out again," Luna said, rolling her parchment and tying the ribbon around it in a bow. "He liked her."

"She can't!" Ginny said. "Andy was like a wounded, bitter puppy after that."

"That doesn't matter," Luna said, putting the parchment in her bag beside too similarly tied parchments. "Nadine doesn't like Roman, and Andy won't date any other girls unless they put a love potion in his favorite candy, send it to him anonymously, and then hope he eats enough of it to work."

"Put a lot of thought into that, didn't you?" Ginny asked with a laugh.

"I put a lot of thought into a lot of things," Luna said, crossing an item off a giant to-do list. "Half a thought isn't very good for anything. Unless it's better for people to think you're stupid. But that usually takes a full thought and a lot of effort, too."

“Sadly, and despite having accomplished absolutely nothing here, I have to go,” Ginny said, collecting her things.

Luna kept studying, looking over her Herbology notes as Ginny set off for McGonagall’s office.

Wrapped up in her heavy winter coat, Ginny settled down to look over her schedule for the week leading up to the break. This was her last meeting with McGonagall since they had jointly decided to scrap their next meeting in favor of giving Ginny time to study for the projects, essays, and exams professors loved to assign before the break. Professor Wrightman and she were supposed to meet the following day; they had a meeting every few weeks to review material and set new goals. She had Potions review with the fifth years the night before the exam on the last day of classes, and before that she was set to meet with Snape. Oh, and she had Quidditch practice and D.A. meetings.

It was a good thing she was on top of her studying, or she would have been completely bowled over.

“Miss Weasley,” McGonagall said, sitting down at her desk. “You’ve been fairing well in Healing magic.”

Ginny’s smile broadened as she put her schedule away. “Thank you. I’ve been working hard at it.”

“Harder than you are in my class, I believe,” McGonagall said.

“I would never admit that, were it true,” Ginny said, still feeling pretty thrilled with the compliment.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t,” McGonagall asked, looking mildly amused around the ends of her lips. The twins had trained Ginny to deal with all of her professors, but they particularly adored McGonagall, who they claimed had clearly been a miscreant Quidditch player in her youth. Plus, Weasley Rule #1: Never Admit Anything.

"I've enjoyed studying it further," Ginny said. "What we did in class made me want to do more."

"Your enthusiasm is encouraging," McGonagall said approvingly. "I'm inclined to let you continue using my facilities for this work so long as it does not affect your usual course load; however, I will have to insist that you stop at least two months before your O.W.L.s begin. Studying for those exams is more important than extra credit work."

Ginny could accept that, even if she didn't think Professor McGonagall was right. "Thank you, professor."

"Do you have anything in particular you would like to work on in the coming months?"

Ginny, not even bothering to hide her enthusiasm, snatched a roll of parchment from her bag and handed it to the professor. "I made a list of the things I'd like to study, and a schedule. I looked at your curriculum for the rest of the term, and matched it up too, so that I wouldn't have too much to do at any one time."

McGonagall unrolled the parchment and read through the first few lines. "This will require a lot of work."

"I know, but you've been so helpful correcting the work I've done so far that I thought I could manage," Ginny said.

"This is very different from what you've previously done," McGonagall said. "The Limitation Laws are very extensive; what we covered in class is a small example. Choosing to study them will not be easy."

"I know, but I remember reading in Transfiguration Prodigy that the intricacies in the third law alone could take up an entire book. And I already have some questions I want to work on, such as if we are unable to create food, why can we create animals?"

McGonagall looked at her over her glasses. "Trying to push the known limits of Transfiguration is not a project for a student."

Ginny nodded. "I would limit my studies to the practical aspects of the known limits."

"I see," McGonagall said, looking down at the schedule.

Ginny waited.

"If you are to work on these laws, I will require an essay on the affects, history, and creation of each," McGonagall said, laying down the parchment. Ginny nodded; McGonagall had required as much of her already. "We will meet once every two weeks to discuss and critique your work."

Hours later, making her way through the castle after her meeting with the Transfiguration professor, Ginny couldn't help but wonder how it was possible that McGonagall was so much cooler than Professor Snape. Snape wasn't willing to help her with anything; McGonagall actually seemed to enjoy meeting with Ginny and discussing spells in detail.

In fact, Snape hadn't even offered her much feedback as all, Ginny realized as she buried her hands further in the pockets of her heavy winter cloak. Snape had given her a vial, banned her from using wandless magic, and now treated her like a slave for absolutely no reason.

Thinking about the hours she had spent in the dungeons when she could have been doing other, more interesting, more productive things made her pause at the staircase heading up to the common room. After all she still had a few minutes before curfew, so she made the decision to turn around and head down to the even-colder dungeons.

Still, she was almost surprised to find herself knocking on Professor Snape's office door a few minutes later.

"Enter if you must," came his muffled drawl.

The heat inside the office was stifling: five different cauldrons boiled along the far wall.

“Professor?” she asked, looking around.

“I doubt you came to my office to stand there like an invalid, Weasley.”

“No, professor,” Ginny said, turning back to him.

“You were to make the Calming Drought tomorrow,” he said. “But if you are incapable of remembering the date and simple instructions—”

“Actually, professor,” she said, cutting him off before he could really start rolling, “I came here to tell you that I won’t be continuing with the extra potion making sessions.”

He actually took the time to look at her. “Excuse me?”

She adjusted the shoulder strap of her bag, which was terribly heavy. “Thank you for the opportunity, but I’m going to focus on other—”

“You will squander your potential working on other classes?” Snape asked, clearly disgusted as he threw his gloves on the counter.

“Yes, sir,” Ginny said, figuring it was easier than defending Transfiguration or Defense.

“Get out,” he barked, and that is exactly what she did, weirdly pleased with her abrupt decision to quit. She had never quit anything before, not really, and it was liberating to do so now.

In fact, the adrenaline pumping through her veins refused to let her merely go back to Gryffindor Tower. No, this was a cause for celebration. Or at least, more errands. She needed to send letters to Bill and Charlie anyway. Her mum and she wrote to each other weekly, but letters from her brother were rare and always appreciated, so she made sure to write back.

The Owlery was empty, which made sense since the journey had taken long enough that curfew had come and gone. She tied to the

letters to two separate schools owls (something which was discouraged), and watched them flap their wings out the window.

There was something peaceful about seeing the sky in the middle of winter, cold and cool and sparkling, the stars so far and removed. Kerney once said that if Ginny had the choice, she would fly to class. They had laughed together, but the truth was that if Ginny had a choice, she would never come into the castle at all. As much as she loved—loved—Hogwarts, it was nothing compared to the freedom of gliding over the ground with no one and nothing around, sitting among the stars a hundred feet in the air and knowing that she was safe and in control. Knowing that the moment was perfect.

The common room was practically empty by the time Ginny made her meandering way back. Fires still remained, which meant that people were still awake, but Ginny only spotted one person in the room; Neville Longbottom sat in a small alcove by a window, facing away from the entrance. Ginny hadn't spoken to him in a while, but when she reached him, she was surprised to find him holding a picture.

"Is that the D.A. photo?" Ginny asked, stepping closer.

Neville jumped, spinning around and hiding the photo, only to relax when he saw it was Ginny. "Oh. Hey, Ginny."

"Hey Neville," Ginny said, walking around to sit on the chair beside his, settling her bag on the ground. "Didn't mean to startle you."

He fidgeted. "I didn't expect anyone to be up."

"Sleep bores me," she said, pretending to sound snooty.

"I was just—" He glanced down at the shiny picture, and Ginny's eyes followed.

"That's not the D.A., is it?" she asked, tilting her head to get a better look at the unfamiliar picture.

He shook his head. "No."

The picture he held up looked a bit similar—a bunch of kids about their age grinning at the camera, arms entwined—but also older. The clothes and hairstyles were out of date, and it was in the sepia tones that Ginny always associated with her parents. That was when she noticed two tall men in the back row.

“That’s the Order of the Phoenix,” Ginny said, turning to Neville.

He nodded.

“Those are my parents,” Neville said, pointing. With a heart-shaped face and wry smile, Mrs. Longbottom looked amused and while Mr. Longbottom looked like a happy teddy bear, towering over his little wife, an arm wrapped around her shoulders.

“They look nice,” Ginny said sincerely.

“I think they were,” Neville said, watching them. “Well, that’s what Gran says anyway.”

Ginny’s heart broke a little as she remembered learning about his parents last Christmas at St. Mungo’s; yet Neville had not wanted to talk about that then, so she would not bring it up now.

Ginny scanned the picture for a second before spotting two light-haired men in the back. “Those were my uncles, Fabian and Gideon.”

“The Prewetts,” Neville said, following her finger. The picture appeared worn around the edges from multiple times being held. “They were Aurors.”

“Mum always said that if they’d had their way, they would have taken a boring job at an office,” Ginny said, thinking of her mother’s half-hearted words. “But the war changed their plans.”

Neville shrugged. “Gran says my dad always wanted to be an Auror, and that’s where he met my mum, his instructor. She hexed him the first day of training, and he took her out to dinner the second.”



He recited the story as if he had heard it a dozen times, but the tenseness in his fingers showed his anxiety.

“You think we could be like them?” Neville asked, fingers dancing just above the page before turning to her. It was strange, Ginny thought, how differently two people could see the same thing. Harry would have looked at this photo and seen death. Neville saw his impossible goals. Both saw a future entrenched in war.

“I think you could,” Ginny said seriously, wondering when the fight had become inevitable.

Neville paused as if unsure if he should say something, but then went on, “Harry’s like them. You know, a hero.”

Ginny ached inside. “I think he’d say it was all luck.”

“Like he did at the Hogshead,” Neville agreed, nodding. The first meeting of the D.A. had been held in that bar, and even as everyone had recounted Harry’s accomplishments, he had minimized them. “He didn’t even know what he was famous for before first year. Dean hadn’t known who Harry was either, but I did, from the stories. Everyone did, but he didn’t care.”

“I know,” Ginny said.

“All the first years this year heard about what he did with Umbridge,” Neville went on. “About standing up to her even though all the students hated him and thought he was crazy.”

It was true; students now glanced at the scar on Harry’s hand almost as much as the one on his forehead.

“But he’s always done that. Like going after the stone our first year when Dumbledore was gone, going after—” Neville stumbled.

“Me?” Ginny prompted quietly but in steady voice. “In the Chamber?”

“Yeah,” Neville said, nodding. “He’s always fought for what’s right.”

Harry's unassuming nature caught a lot of people by surprise, but it was his fiery determination that the students now associated with him, the fire that wouldn't let him cave to Umbridge, that refused to let him take the easy way out and pretend like Voldemort hadn't risen.

"His parents did all that incredible stuff, even before the end," Neville said, turning to her. "Escaping Vold— Vold—"

His face was slightly red.

"I can't even say his name," Neville said angrily. "Harry's called him that since first year."

Ginny noticed that Neville never sounded jealous of Harry, merely admiring.

"Harry grew up a Muggle. He said it's like any other word. According to Ron, Harry and Hermione also didn't flinch when Malfoy called her the M word," Ginny said.

Neville looked surprised briefly before he shook his head a bit. "I should still be able to say You-Know-Who's name. My parents— My parents stood up to him. They fought him, too. Three times. And survived. I should say his name."

Ginny watched her old friend struggle, and said, "Then do it."

He blinked. "What?"

"Do it. Say it," she said, remembering a conversation very similar to this between Kerney and herself.

"Volde— Volde—" His face scrunched up and he took a few breaths. "Volde-mort."

It was weird, but she still felt like the name was taboo, no matter how often she heard it; she pushed that feeling irritably away as she nodded at his proud demeanor. "Nicely done."

“My gran always told me to be proud about what happened to my parents,” Neville said, glancing down at the photo. “To tell people that they were heroes, but—”

Ginny wanted to hug Neville, but settled for squeezing his forearm. “They were heroes.”

“I guess,” he said. “But sometimes I wish they would have hidden better.”

It occurred to Ginny that Neville probably didn’t have anyone to talk about this with.

“Do you visit them often?” she asked.

He paused mid-nod, turning to her. “You dad’s better, right? I haven’t asked Ron, but I assumed after last Christmas—”

“Yeah,” she said, remembering exactly how empathetic Neville had always been. “He’s fine. It took a while, but he’s fine.”

“That’s good,” Neville said, glancing down at the picture.

“Thanks.”

There was a long pause.

“I think we’re going to be the Order of the Phoenix this time,” Neville said. “The D.A., I mean.”

It was the one secret they could not share with everyone, that the second Order had already risen. But she knew she he meant, knew that he felt the responsibility to end this escalating war that had taken his parents from him.

“We’ll fight,” she assured him.

“I think they’d want that,” Neville said, eyes trained on the picture.

“What about you?” Ginny asked, surprised by his phrasing.

"I want to win," Neville said resolutely, looking up at her. "I want to help Harry."

"We will," Ginny said, taking his hand. If she had been a bit more distanced from the situation, she might have thought it was odd that Neville assumed that Harry would lead the fight against Voldemort. Neville knew nothing of prophecy or the ties that bond Harry and Voldemort. Knew nothing of destiny that ensnared his sixteen-year-old friend.

But he assumed Harry's role in leadership for the same reason that Ginny did: they knew Harry personally, had fought with him, and they knew he would never stop fighting until Voldemort was gone.

With the Potions exam creeping up, the unauthorized review session with all the fifth years took place that Tuesday at eight (sans Olivia Flint and her toady best mate). As usual, the huge group took over one of the large Defense rooms that had enough desks to house all of them at once, and set to work.

Devon had charmed the chalk to write out every Potion they had covered that year. As a group, they took notes on each of them, reciting from notes and books, and copying down the general information. When there was a disagreement, they usually deferred to Ginny and Devon, but occasionally they had to search texts for answers.

It was a long, tedious process that took the entire night, but one that had helped many of them do exponentially better in Potions, so everyone kept coming back.

"My head is going to explode," Colin complained, stuffing his notes in his bag as everyone began to leave.

"I know what you mean," Andy said.

"I don't," Nadine chirped, lifting her bag lightly onto her shoulder. "I thought it was invigorating."

"Oh, shut up, would you?" Andy grouched, putting on a jacket.

"Andy!" called Talia the Ravenclaw from across the room. She had been practically launching herself at him all year, even increasing her efforts after Ginny had interrupted them on the first day of Defense. "Wait up!"

"Save me," Andy muttered at Ginny as Nadine scowled.

"I think Nadine has that covered," Ginny said, nodding at the girl who wrapped her arm through Andy's.

"Sorry, Talia," Nadine called back. "Andy and I have to go finish a project we were working on together."

"Oh." Surprised, Talia quickly covered. "I'll have to talk to you later then, Andy."

Andy nodded politely, but he was clearly pleased. He waited until Talia was out of the room to tell Nadine, "Thanks."

"She's a troll," Nadine said, releasing him and leaving. Soon everyone was filing out, leaving just Devon and Ginny to rearrange the desks. They were always last to leave.

"That was a good revision session," Ginny said, cleaning off the board. "I hope we didn't forget any potions."

"We didn't," Devon said. "You didn't, at least."

"We could have sabotaged them all, you know, made us look even better," Ginny said with a grin.

"Maybe," Devon agreed lightly.

"You never take me up on the offer," Ginny said, slipping her notes back into her bag. "I thought you were supposed to be an ambitious Slytherin. It would keep at least a handful of them out of our N.E.W.T. Potions class."

“Planning devious deeds again?” said a male voice from the doorway. “I hate to tell you the attendance in your popular revision sessions might dwindle once word got out.”

Ginny turned to see Theodore Nott casually standing in the doorway in much the same manner he had at the Three Broomsticks during her Hogsmeade date.

“It’s our O.W.L. year,” Ginny pointed out. “By the time they figured out they failed the exams, they would have already ruined their chances of continuing.”

“Increasing your own chance of scrutiny in a smaller Potions class size,” Theo said, stepping into the room. “Not exactly the most brilliant scheme.”

“I have five months,” Ginny said. “I’m sure I can figure out the details.”

“I’ll wait with bated breath,” Theodore said. He sounded perpetually amused, as if the world around him was humorous, but only he understood the joke.

Ginny couldn’t help but smile. “Are you here for some Potions help? I have to admit that if you need help with the fifth year work, you’re probably going to need more than one night.”

His amusement never waned, even as he looked past Ginny. “Devon, are you ready to go?”

“One minute,” she said, organizing her notes from the sound of it.

Theodore's attention returned to Ginny. “If you quit my potions project to focus more time on quaint little meetings like this, I have to say I’m insulted.”

That made her blink. “Your project?”

“Yes,” he said, drawing out the word. “The one Professor Snape assigned you.”

She smiled snidely at his condescending tone as she pulled her bag onto her shoulder, and moved to walk past him. "Why? Upset that you lost your potion-making house-elf? See you later, Devon!"

"Your potions were good," he said, surprising her by following her down the corridor.

"They were perfect," she said, not turning around.

"And yet," he said, over-enunciating the word, "you felt the need to abandon the project."

"Devon's back that way," Ginny said lightly, pointing.

"She gave me one minute." Theodore paused. "Use it to explain your reasoning."

She turned slightly. "Snape didn't tell you?"

"I wouldn't be asking if he had. I'm not that pathetic," he said with a smirk. Ginny had to admit that she found him very entertaining and a bit engaging.

She stopped walking to face him. "I quit because I was bored with simply mass producing elixirs."

He cocked his head to the side. "That wasn't worth your time?"

"I wasn't learning anything."

"I'm sure you were becoming very proficient at chopping and dicing."

"Devon and I lead a Potions review," she said, motioning back to the classroom. "Chopping isn't exactly challenging for me."

"Yet you wanted an extra credit project," he said.

She waved him off. "I'm good at Potions."

“I’m better,” he said, still looking amused. “I could have taught you something, but now that you aren’t working with me anymore—”

“I wasn’t working with you before,” she pointed out, cutting off the bribe that was sure to follow. “I was working for Professor Snape, who wouldn’t even tell me why I was making the potions.”

“I’m making a new Sleeping Draught,” he said simply.

Ginny mentally reviewed the potions she had made. “Why the Replenishing Elixir?”

“Part of the reason Dreamless Sleep is so addictive is because the body’s nutrients become depleted, causing a dependence on the dragon blood to maintain health,” he said.

She shook her head. “But the basic ingredient in the Replenishing Elixir is Haven’s Root. It would counteract the seeds you need to induce sleep.”

His eyes lit up, and he looked almost pleased. “Not if the temperature of the cauldron is maintained at two independent levels.”

Interesting. “I made five of those elixirs.”

“And I ruined all of them.” Theodore Nott sounded proud of this accomplishment.

She crossed her arms. “Were you trying to add it to the new Sleeping Draught or trying to convert it into one?”

“And here I thought you were smart,” Theodore said, shaking his head, reminding her strongly of Charlie at that moment.

“I only asked because neither would be possible with a boiled root,” she said.

“Then you should be able to guess what I was doing, shouldn’t you, Miss Weasley?” he asked, backing away from her.



She wasn't about to let him leave that easily.

"Why were you watching me and Duncan on our date at Hogsmeade?"

His insufferable smirk never faltered. "It's hard not to notice an enraged witch storming in and out of the Three Broomsticks. Please don't think it had anything to do with who you were as a person."

She laughed, feeding off his undeniable energy. "Implying that I am insignificant is not the way to woo me back onto your project."

He waved a hand. "I don't want you making my potions anymore. I'll find a peon to do that for me."

Amused, she said, "Glad to know I'm easily replaceable."

"We'll see about that," he said, cocking his head to the side. "But now I have to go pick up Devon. Wouldn't want her to get lost on her way back to the common room."

"Oh sure," Ginny said sarcastically. "Because Devon's such a scatterbrain."

"That's a mean thing to call your friend," he teased.

Ginny laughed. "Should I limit my mean commentary to you?"

"Sure," he said, pausing as he went and walking back to her with a hand outstretched. "I'm Theo Nott, by the way, Potions Master in the Making."

She laughed again, taking his hand. "And I'm Ginny Weasley, a stepping stone on your way to Potions greatness."

"Potions Supremacy, Ginny. Potions Supremacy," he said, waving a hand as he left.

The Great Hall was deserted at three o'clock in the afternoon on the last day of class. Everyone was either packing or hanging out with

friends in the common room, Ginny thought as she made her way back to Gryffindor Tower, walking the path with a self-satisfied smile. Tomorrow she and Harry, her brother, and Hermione would all be heading back to Spinner's End.

She wondered briefly whether Herpo missed his old home at all, but swiftly decided that the kitten seemed to be happiest wherever Harry was.

Deserted corridors at Hogwarts were nothing new to a girl who had a habit of being out her dormitory after curfew, but it was somewhat odd to see the halls empty during the day. But the too-quiet, placid atmosphere didn't last long.

"That hex isn't supposed to spiral before exploding. That makes it less effective."

Ginny stopped, recognizing Luna's voice instantly.

"What would Loony Lovegood know about hexes? Can't even find your own shoes, I hear," another voice mocked. Ginny knew that voice, too: Olivia Flint.

"They're on my feet," Luna said in her eerily calm voice.

There was a muffled sound of frustration. "You're so weird! How do you stand it?"

"That's easy, she's not a complete bitch like you," Ginny said, entering the room. "I hardly think you're in a place ask anyone why they don't hate themselves."

Olivia's face hardened into a look of pure loathing.

"Speaking of whores," she said acidly. "Here's the girl throwing herself at Baron Ramsey. As if the Slytherin Head Boy would ever look twice at a poor, dirty little blood traitor like you." She wore a satisfied smirk.

“Baron? Oh, we just spoke. He’s a good friend of yours, isn’t he, Luna?” Ginny took enormous delight in watching Olivia seethe. It was almost as much fun as watching Snape.

“Loony Lovegood isn’t good enough to even be in the same room as a Slytherin.”

“We’re all students, no matter the colors we wear,” Luna said, still calm and seemingly unhurt by Olivia’s words. It was one of the reasons people so rarely picked on her and chose instead to hide her things: she never reacted properly to bullying.

“You are a freak!”

“You’re pathetic,” Ginny said, increasingly angry.

Ginny—who easily could have out-drawn Olivia and blasted her across the room before the other girl could say “jealousy”—had turned to Luna for moment, and did not see when Olivia sent a Cutting Hex at Ginny, who barely had time to flinch back to avoid it. The spell caught her across the cheek, and Ginny wasted no time in exacting her retribution. Consecutive shouts of Diffindo and Dolere in quick succession sent Olivia crashing back into a row of desks.

Ginny felt vindicated, but her satisfaction was interrupted by a voice saying, “Stop this now.”

Professor Wrightman entered the room briskly, but with the same rigid grace she always had. Spying the somewhat crumpled form of Olivia Flint, moving and whining on the floor.

“Miss Weasley,” she said, sounding reprimanding. Ginny turned to face her teacher, whose eyes trailed the considerable slice running—and bleeding—across Ginny’s left cheek. But Ginny knew her own injury would matter very little when it came down to punishment. It was quite evident which one of them had taken the brunt of the spells cast, and it sure wasn’t her.

“Forty points for harming a fellow student,” the professor said in clipped angry tones. “You will report to my office at eight o’clock for detention.”

Ginny’s expression made no secret of her outrage at such a high penalty, particularly when she had come between Luna and the heinous little skank on the floor. She pointed to Olivia, who was now sitting up, cradling her disfigured arm, but smiling nastily.

“Aren’t you going to take points from her?” Ginny yelled indignantly. “She cursed me first!”

“I will deal with Miss Flint,” Professor Wrightman answered, but Ginny got no comfort from her assurance. Olivia looked sickened, but Ginny hardly noticed, too caught up thinking that it was just her luck that the only professor wandering by would be a sodding Slytherin.

“Yes, I’m sure the punishment will be as fair as can be,” Ginny smarted back. In Ginny’s experience at Hogwarts, Slytherin teachers always let their students get away with the trouble they made. Why would Professor Wrightman be any different?

“Do not speak to me like I am your peer,” Wrightman snapped. “Now leave. Miss Lovegood, stay.”

Before her professor could scold her or ratchet up her punishment any further, Ginny stormed out of the room. She didn’t go to the hospital wing and was glad that no one dared speak to her as she stormed through the common room and up to her four-poster.

“You look good,” Kerney said, looking up from where she was packing her truck for the holiday.

“Olivia. Fight,” Ginny barked.

“Ah,” Kerney said, and went back to packing.

At seven o’clock, Ginny decided to get something from the kitchens before detention, since she had been sitting in her room, brooding, all

through dinner. She walked grumpily back through the common room and all the way to the kitchens.

Unfortunately, she hadn't been nearly as hungry as she usually was for dinner, and had only taken fifteen minutes to eat. Not wanting to return to the scrutiny of the common room, she reluctantly decided to go ahead to the Defense professor's office. You never know, she thought with no small amount of disdain, maybe I can start early and get out of there sooner.

But if she had any serious hopes of starting and finishing her detention early, they were dashed when she crossed through the Defense classroom and found the teacher's office in the back of it empty. She sat in the visitor's chair and looked around, becoming more disgruntled as she noticed that the arrangement and décor of the room revealed virtually nothing about the individual who occupied it. Everything was obnoxiously—though tastefully—neat. Ginny would have been scared to touch things if she didn't completely resent being there in the first place.

Wrightman entered smoothly a minute later, sweeping her beautiful cloak around her shoulders as she sat in her chair across from Ginny. As usual, her make-up was flawless, and a simple scarf elegantly accented her blonde hair.

"I gave you my trust in November," Professor Wrightman began in her clipped, polished voice. "Tell me why you chose to throw it away."

Ginny's eyes narrowed. "This didn't have anything to do with you, Professor. Olivia was harassing Luna, and I couldn't just stand by and watch."

Her professor seemed unimpressed. "You took it to a physical level."

"Olivia shot the first spell!"

"I've seen your work," Wrightman said. "I know you could have dodged that spell and held a shield long enough for Miss Lovegood to retrieve a professor."

Well, that might be true. “I was caught off guard. I acted on instinct.”

“The instinct to attack,” Wrightman said drolly. “How noble.”

“That isn’t fair. She cut my face,” Ginny said, motioning to her cheek.

“And you threw her over a desk.” Wright leaned forward. “Did that accomplish what you wanted? Will it prevent future attacks? Anything short of debilitating or killing the girl only serves to infuriate her more, ensuring future retribution. What you did was short-sighted and stupid.”

“You think I should have killed her?” Ginny asked, mouth hanging open.

“I think you should have humiliated her by showing you wouldn’t stoop to her level,” Wrightman said. “Miss Lovegood handles situations like this with grace. You did not need to step in.”

“Luna never defends herself,” Ginny said. “She’s a good friend and—”

“She is smart enough and capable enough to handle such a situation on her own.”

Ginny balled her hands into fists. “So I was the only one who did anything wrong?”

Wrightman ignored the question. “I gave you the choice not to attend my class anymore with the stipulation that you would accept the O.W.L. score you received, but if you act as you did today ever again, I will fail you.”

“You can’t do that! This has nothing to do with you or your class!”

“You reflect upon the adults in your life,” Wrightman said. “Your behavior was unacceptable, indicating a lack of respect for authority.”

“Because I’m not a Slytherin?” Ginny asked, standing and waving her hand around. “Sorry, but I can’t stand by and watch my friends hurt just because you say it’s proper. That’s not right.”

Wrightman's eyes locked on Ginny's. "Then learn some subtly."

"Follow your example, professor? Why don't you show me how I was suppose to act?" Ginny asked, throwing her hand out and accidentally hitting the professor's hand. Suddenly feeling like she was pushed through a bucket of water, Ginny yelped as the room around her dissolved, only to be replaced by an unfamiliar room with soft white carpet and no sign of Professor Wrightman.

"What the hell?" Ginny asked, looking around; she hadn't felt the affects of a Portkey.

"You can't come here again," said a voice in front of Ginny, drawing her attention to a young witch and wizard in the midst of an intense conversation right in front of her, though turned slightly away.

Ginny stepped forward. "What do you—"

"Don't you have anything to say to me?" the wizard asked. He and the girl were standing less than a meter away, but neither acknowledged Ginny's presence.

"Excuse me," Ginny said loudly.

The wizard took a step forward; he was tall and appeared young, though Ginny couldn't see his face.

"Don't," the witch said, holding up a hand, and Ginny realized that these people could not see or hear her, as if she were in a Pensieve. Ginny moved closer to the pair, and her jaw dropped as she recognized the witch facing her. It was Professor Wrightman talking—a younger one who looked as if she were still in school, much like the pictures Ginny had seen in the yearbook.

"Say something," the bloke demanded, but Ginny couldn't focus. Was this a memory? If so, how had she stumbled into it?

"What would you have me say, Sirius?" Wrightman asked, causing Ginny to wheel around to stare at the unmistakable figure of a

younger Sirius Black. "That I'm sorry? I'm not. This was your fault. You knew this would happen and still you made the choice to turn your back on your family."

The young Sirius radiated bottled up energy. "I didn't turn my back on my family. I moved out to dispute their decisions."

"And became scorch mark seventeen," Wrightman said. "Did you really think my father and mother would still approve a marriage between us after that?"

Ginny stopped examining Sirius to stare at the young Wrightman when she processed what she had heard. Marriage?

"You could have told me yourself," Sirius said. "You could have had the decency to tell me."

Wrightman didn't even flinch at his angry tone or gestures. "I only found out when James Potter appeared on my doorstep with your mother's letter in hand."

"What?" Sirius had been blind-sided by that, Ginny saw, but not nearly as much as she. Ginny had dismissed Wrightman on the first day of class, putting her in a box with other authority figures who underestimated her. To find out that the Defense professor knew Sirius Black—that she could have married him—left her reeling. Having heard how close James Potter and Sirius Black were, it shouldn't have come as a surprise that Wrightman knew them both, but it did.

"You know how these things work, Sirius," Wrightman said, shaking her head slightly. "Why would I be consulted?"

"Because it's your future, you stupid girl!" Sirius yelled. Even in the midst of trying to process of this, Ginny had the piece of mind to doubt that anyone other than Sirius Black would dare call Gertrude Wrightman a stupid girl. Wrightman's clenched jaw seemed to reinforce that she was not used to being treated like this.



"It is my family's future, and an alliance which my parents will arrange as tradition demands." Her tone became so formal that it might as well have been a screaming fight.

Sirius's mouth snapped shut for a moment. "What if they chose Malfoy?"

"Lucius is already married to your cousin." Wrightman, Ginny thought, was missing the point.

"What if they chose Snape?" Sirius asked, and if Ginny thought she heard hatred in Harry's voice when he said Draco Malfoy's name, it was nothing compared to the scorn in Sirius's tone.

"Don't be ridiculous. You know he doesn't have the stature. Nor does Regulus, no matter what he now receives," Wrightman said. Ginny had to think a moment to remember that that was the name of Sirius's brother. "My parents will choose properly. No one lowly. No one without class. No one involved Dark Arts. They will protect the name and the legacy."

Compartmentalizing her questions about where she was or how she had gotten there, Ginny took a moment to realize that Wrightman and Sirius weren't speaking like children, though they looked about her age. She had never met anyone that spoke like this. Well, actually, Baron Ramsey did, but he was the exception rather than the rule.

"Leave your family," Sirius said with a desperation that made Ginny want to comfort him. "They would feed you to the wolves if it increased their prestige."

"And I would gladly face those wolves if it helped my family," Wrightman said. Well, if that wasn't the dumbest thing Ginny had ever heard.

"Don't be so stubborn," Sirius said, looking as exasperated as he did when he spoke to Ginny's mum about Harry. "Would you join the Death Eaters for them?"

Wrightman glared. "Of course not. That would taint us forever."

"To say nothing of supporting a murdering, racist psychopath," Sirius snapped.

"I would never choose the path of evil."

"But you don't fight it either, do you? Your cousin Edgar? Narcissa? How about your current houseguest whose making invitations with your mother? Don't you want a pretty mask like them?" Sirius practically yelled.

"The choices of our friends cannot change how much my family needs me."

"That's bullshit!" Sirius yelled, before deflating as he looking so beseeching at Wrightman that Ginny ached. "Leave all of this behind. Leave your family. You don't need this or them."

Much as Ginny hated Wrightman right then for making Sirius this way, she had to admit that if Sirius was trying to convince Wrightman to object to breaking off the engagement, Ginny didn't think he was going about it the right way. Even Ginny could see that ordering the blonde to abandon her family was not the best way to get his point across.

"You know I can't do that," Wrightman said. And despite the fact that she could see the answer coming, Ginny wanted to hex her. Couldn't she see that he was offering a way to keep her away from Death Eaters? "You know I can't, Sirius."

"You could."

"Sirius, don't ask this of me," Wrightman said. "My family and the tradition it represents—"

"Are nothing!"

Ginny cringed. Bad move, Sirius.

“They define my life,” Wrightman said. Sirius looked like he was about to say something, but when Wrightman shook her head at her, he closed his mouth. “The way your family defined yours, and without them you’re falling apart.”

Given her experience with Sirius’s mother—in her dreams and in the painting—Ginny would argue whether that was a bad thing.

Sirius said, “I’m coming together as I should have the first time.”

“It would be easier for you to reunite with your family than for me to leave mine.” That was rather hard to believe, as Wrightman’s family sounded as evil and horrible as Sirius’s, what with the Death Eater friends.

“You’ve made your choice already, then,” Sirius said, anger flaring up again.

“I made my decision months ago, when I asked a girl to take a walk with me after curfew and she proved herself to be exactly who I always thought she was,” Wrightman said, and Ginny had no idea what she was talking about.

That seemed to stump Sirius. “You would really follow her?”

“Yes, and I’m on her side until the end of this mess,” Wrightman said, raising her chin. “Will you follow her?”

“To death, I’d follow her,” Sirius said simply. Ginny really wanted to know whom they were talking about.

Sirius looked Gertrude in the eye for a long time and finally said, “I’ll miss you, Gertrude.”

“Not much and not for long. We’ve never been more than acquaintances, brought together by our parents and a now-broken agreement,” Wrightman said in the same tone she used to give instructions in class. Even Ginny could tell that wasn’t true. She wanted to shake this tiny, refined, distant girl. It was like watching

someone in a Wronski Feint get closer and closer to the ground, knowing they wouldn't be able to pull up in time.

"We would have been great together," Wrightman said, relenting to what Ginny felt was the truth. "I was as upset about the contract breaking as you are, but I will see you again, if you stay beside her."

Sirius took two steps forward, placed his hands on either side of Wrightman's delicate face, leaned down, and kissed her. It was a softer kiss than anything Ginny had ever seen, and it felt like an intensely private moment. Ginny was embarrassed to intrude and wished adamantly that she could leave them alone.

Ginny gasped as she slammed back into the present, still sitting in the wooden chair across the desk from Professor Wrightman, though they were no longer touching.

"Who the hell are you?" Ginny asked, standing and pushing her chair back with her knees.

"You can do wandless magic," Wrightman said, as if that had anything to do with the topic at hand.

"What was that? Was that a memory?" Ginny asked, so curious that her questions ran into one another. "Were you engaged to—"

"My personal life is none of your concern," Wrightman said, leaning back and crossing her arms over her chest.

"It is when you drag me into it."

"You invaded my mind," Wrightman said.

"You abandoned him," Ginny said, suddenly irritated as she thought through what she had seen. "Sirius needed you, and you—"

Wrightman stood. "This is the second time you have broken a school rule today, though this invasion of privacy did not seem intentional. For the rest of this hour, you will clean the third year training area in the adjacent classroom. I will also expect a four foot essay on Mind

Magic and its wandless uses, including moral culpability, after the holiday.”

While she might hate writing essays, this wasn’t a punishment Ginny was about to dispute; she wanted to know what had happened.

“Professor, why—”

Wrightman ignored her. “If you break my trust again, you will be punished for every Defense class you have missed. If you attack another student again, even if provoked, I will not be as lenient.”

Clearly Wrightman would answer none of the questions Ginny needed answered, frustrating as that was. Resolving to find the answers herself, Ginny went to serve the rest of her detention, replaying the scene between Wrightman and Sirius over and over again in her head.

## CHAPTER 9

### Christmas Breaking

Grimmauld Place had grown even more cheerful and light since the summer. Winky looked exhilarated when the entire crowd of Weasleys children had come barging in looking for a meal and commenting on the newly painted walls; the subsequent meal was absolutely delightful.

"Slow down, Ginny. Don't want to go back to school too big to fit on your broom," Charlie said, taking an enormous bite of chicken.

"I am fitter than ever," Ginny said, taking great delight in eating a large forkful of mashed potatoes right in front of her brother.

"I'm sure the blokes are lining up to witness this," Charlie said, rolling her eyes.

"Go on, Gin. Tell Charlie about your fabulous date with Duncan Moran," Fred teased, leaning back with a self-satisfied smile.

"The part before or after we shagged?" Ginny asked to wipe the smugness off his face.

All of her brothers except one choked on whatever they were eating. Knowing her best, Charlie just looked amused as he filched a roll from Bill's plate.

"That's disgusting, Ginny," George reprimanded.

"Absolutely vile," Ron agreed after spitting out his mouthful of food.

"If he impregnated you, I'll raise the baby," Charlie said, taking a bite out of the roll. "I'll draw up a training regiment."

"While Duncan's mother and sister may be good at Quidditch," Ginny said. "Duncan himself is nothing too spectacular. He isn't even on the team."

“Doesn’t matter,” Charlie said, waving his hand absently. “It’s all in the family. With his genes and yours, I could make that baby a star.”

“The hypothetical bastard child of our teenage sister?” Bill asked, one eyebrow raised.

Charlie nodded. “Sure.”

Bill took a moment. “I could help on weekends.”

Moving past their disgust with the idea of Ginny shagging, all five of her brothers at the table began to plan out a month-by-month schedule for the non-existent child, debating whether strength training should be introduced before five years. It reminded her of dinners growing up, the raucous conversation that flitted between subjects, everyone teasing one another and stealing food, laughing. Ginny smiled at the familiarity.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were away on Order business—something to do with Mrs. Weasley’s distant relations—and Harry and Hermione wouldn’t be joining them for a while, so the Weasley kids had Grimmauld Place to themselves.

“We could fly the baby up really high at an early age to eliminate the fear of heights,” Fred suggested.

“Drop him to make him grow accustomed to dives,” George added.

“And make him learn strategy instead of the alphabet,” Ron said.

Bill looked doubtful. “How would we do that?”

“With those stupid pop-up books Mum always used in lessons,” Ron said, as if it were obvious. “Replace letters with stick figures.”

“My hypothetical bastard child could learn reading and strategy at the same time,” Ginny said, pointing her fork at Ron. “They’re not mutually exclusive.”

"The HBC would have to be literate to handle the promotional contracts," Bill pointed out.

Fred waved him off. "George and I would handle all contracts. For a fee, of course."

"HBC would be your blood. You couldn't rip him off," Charlie said, eyes narrowed.

"HBC could be a girl," Ginny piped up. "Named Doris."

"Oh, Ginny, stop ruining it!" Fred said, scrunching up his face. "HBC will clearly be a boy."

"And you'll name him Gred," George said, as if this were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Mum and Dad had six boys before they landed you," Bill said, tipping his glass at her. "Odds are against a girl."

"Maybe I should go around getting impregnated by the best athletes in the world and just give the babies to you lot until each of you has one," Ginny said.

"That could work," Ron said. "Enough for a Quidditch team almost."

"It would make you a slag," Charlie said, "but I think that's a sacrifice I'm willing to accept."

Ginny laughed. "Glad to know the price of my virtue."

"Everything has a price. Be glad yours is manageable," Charlie said, missing the point entirely.

"Oh thanks a—Ouch!" Ginny's glass fell from her hand as a shooting pain passed through it.

"Whoa. You okay?" Ron asked, looking startled.



“Ow. Yeah,” Ginny grunted, wrapping her left hand around the throbbing right one. “Just my hand.”

“You sure?” Ron asked.

She nodded. “It’s nothing.”

Conversation turned from babies to girlfriends to guessing who among them would have the first wedding, taking attention away from her, and Ginny could not be happier. The pain in her hand—and the accompanying sensation of piercing cold—reminded Ginny of the dreams she had experienced earlier in the year, and that was just about the very last thing that she wanted to discuss with her brothers.

She had not had any dreams like the ones with the Unforgivables, but ever since her detention with Professor Wrightman, she had been ready for them. Whether or not it was intentional, Ginny had, according to Wrightman, used Wandless magic, the one thing Professor Snape had told her not to do.

This localized pain, however, was something entirely new, and Ginny knew that she would have to write to Professor Dumbledore about it soon if it persisted.

In the meantime, she had a project that benefitted from the fact that Harry was away on mysterious business, unable to take them all to Spinner’s End; while spending time with her brothers, Ginny planned to ransack Grimmauld Place for information on Professor Wrightman and her relationship with Sirius.

“What about Ginny?” Ron exclaimed, refocusing Ginny’s attention of the conversation. “She’s practically drooling after a Slytherin at school.”

“I don’t think that’s the best strategy to attract a bloke, Ginny,” Bill said mock-kindly.

“You mean the trail of saliva I’ve been leaving behind me isn’t attractive?” Ginny asked sarcastically.

“Is the Slytherin a good Quidditch player?” ever-practical George asked.

“If Ron’s referring to Baron Ramsey, then yes,” Ginny said, not ashamed in the least, which made Ron’s face grow amusingly red.

“Ramsey?” George asked, clearly trying to put a face to that name. “He’s a bit dull.”

“He is not,” Ginny said without thinking.

“Oh really?” Fred asked, leaning forward. “Tell us what makes him interesting.”

“I hate you,” she muttered.

“No witty response. She’s broken,” Charlie said to Bill.

“He’s a good Keeper,” she said to distract them.

Charlie waved a hand. “That’s an entirely different skill set than Chaser. No good.”

“He’s a Slytherin,” Ron repeated, putting both hands flat on the table.

Bill shrugged from where he was leaning back relaxed in his chair. “I dated a Slytherin in school. Dumb girl. Great legs.”

“Francy or something like that, right?” Charlie asked, eyes sliding over to him. “You really like those F-names, huh?”

Bill grinned. “They’re easy to gasp out when we’re—”

“Hey!” Ginny interrupted, waving her fork in the air. “Little sister right here! Don’t gross me out.”

“Aw, does sex make you uncomfortable?” Fred asked, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “Poor Baron.”

Ron choked, and Ginny stood, saying, "I'm leaving. I hope you're happy to have driven me from the table."

"Will you bring us dessert?" George asked. All of them perked up, looking at her hopefully, but she was cut off before she could tell them off.

Winky was instantly beside him asking, "Do the masters want dessert?"

"Never mind, Ginny. Go ahead and pout. We don't need you," he said, and began placing orders with the accommodating house-elf.

Bill smiled. "Aw, Gin. Don't let me scare you off. Eat some ice cream with us."

"Not that she really needs it," Charlie muttered, which was when she decided to sit back down in her chair and order a double chocolate sundae.

"She hates you, you know," Bill told Charlie.

Charlie shook his head. "I'm her favorite. She just doesn't want to hurt your feelings."

Yes, she had big plans for this holiday, but searching through Sirius's things could wait. Her brothers were here.

Despite loathing writing essays, Ginny spent the second day of the holiday holed up in the Grimmauld Place library, six books stacked on the desk beside her parchment. Luckily, most of her brothers worked, and Ron had convinced the twins to bring him to their shop to help them reorganize the shelves or something. When Ginny had said she wasn't interested, they had almost died, but after making her promise not to blackmail any of them for letting Ron go to the store, she was left mainly alone.

She might have put off doing the essay to spite her professor, but Mrs. Black had come back into Ginny's dreams the night before, whispering about destiny and greatness. If Snape was right that her

wandless magic was connected to the dreams, she wanted to figure out how.

“Interesting reading, Gin,” Charlie said, flopping sideways on the lounge chair, legs bent over the armrest.

“Makes you wish you were back in school, huh?” Ginny asked, eyes still scanning her book.

“This doesn’t look like any book I had to read in school.” In her peripheral vision, Ginny saw him rotate in the chair to a more normal position.

“It’s for detention,” she admitted, making a note.

“A book on Mind Magic?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She tapped her quill against the table. “I accidentally invaded my professor’s mind by”—she glanced at her notes—“making solid eye contact, touching her, and verbally demanding access.”

“Really?” he asked, walking over to stand beside her and looking at the books more closely.

“The verbal part is optional. It’s really about intent,” Ginny said, still tapping her quill.

“I thought you worked with Remus on controlling your wandless abilities.”

“I did,” she said, upset. “But we didn’t cover this.”

He dragged a chair over. “You should have. That was stupid for him to overlook, as stubborn as you are.”

“Probably,” she agreed, a tight knot of worry in her stomach. She needed to talk about this with someone, something she rarely felt obligated to do.

Charlie traced the words as he read them with his finger, absently asking, “You didn’t happen to see inside Snape’s mind, did you?”

Ginny smiled. “I think I’d have gone nuts already if that were the case.”

“It would still be quite a trip. Dumbledore’s mind too,” Charlie said, the edge of adventure lacing his words. “This bit about collecting memories seems interesting.”

“That’s what I saw,” she said, staring at the book beside her. “My Defense professor’s memory.”

“Your Defense professor? Bet that made them feel ineffectual.”

Ginny pulled a book closer, opening to a particular page. “It says Occlumency is the only way to block Mind Magic, but that wandless magic makes it possible to override that defense as long as physical contact is established and eye contact maintained. Then, only the invasive party can pull back unless the other person is highly trained.”

He leaned over to read with her. “So you’re a pretty deadly weapon.”

“That’s pretty much the last thing I wanted to hear,” Ginny said. She who had always wanted to be strong enough to challenge her brothers, she who loved to learn and test the limits of magic, wanted absolutely none of the power she apparently possessed.

“Well, according to the title of your essay, you’re writing about the moral implication of all of this. I’m sure your guilt provides feet of material to write about.”

“It’s not even that I’m feeling guilty or can’t finish this essay,” she admitted, scooting back from the desk to face her brother. “It’s that I shouldn’t be able to do Mind Magic. I shouldn’t know how.”

"I assume you didn't know," Charlie said. "Unless you're just pretending to read these books for my sake."

"I have some of Tom Riddle's memories," she said, and that had his full attention. "It's what I had those nightmares about after first year."

"Okay," he said, waiting for more information to judge like he always did.

"I think he's the reason I knew how to do this," she said.

Ever practical Charlie took that in, then said, "Even if that's the case, it's your skill now, to use as you want."

"I'm scared," she admitted, her heart pounding as the confession slipped from her lips.

"You're stronger than you think. And I don't even mean at this stuff." Charlie said, nodded at the essay. "Ever since you were a baby, you never let us push you around. Don't let a memory bully you now."

Bill was her smartest brother. Everyone knew that. But Charlie was better at this sort of thing, at being human.

"Thanks."

He nodded, and left the room quieter than he came, letting Ginny return to the book that let her know exactly how powerful she could be, if only she could forget the cost.

After the intense self-examination she underwent with her essay (which she had finished and rolled up already), Ginny was happy to wake early and find the house relatively quiet on the third day of the holiday. She decided to look for information about Wrightman in Sirius's still-vacant room on the top floor of Grimmauld Place as a bit of a distraction.

It felt strangely like breaking into a museum. Having never actually been in the room before, Ginny didn't know what she expected, but it wasn't the immaculately clean space that she found.

Ginny wasn't sure if her mother, Dobby, or Winky had been in the room, but the bed was made, the curtains drawn. Nothing was on the floor, and all the drawers in the dresser were closed. The only sign of discord was on the desk, where a quill lay across a blank piece of parchment as though waiting for a letter that never came.

Well, Ginny thought, I can't just stand around staring.

So she set to work snooping, one of her many little-sister-skills. Not knowing exactly what she was looking for, Ginny settled for trying to find a photo or a journal. The journal would be ideal as it would probably explain what Ginny had seen in Wrightman's office, but a picture of Gertrude Wrightman in this room would at least confirm that Ginny wasn't insane.

Unfortunately, after thirty minutes of searching, there was nothing that even resembled something that might help Ginny piece together the relationship between Sirius Black and Gertrude Wrightman.

"Ginny, what are you doing in here?" The voice startled her, causing her to jump up from where she had dejectedly sat on the edge of the bed.

"Remus!" Ginny exclaimed, seeing her old professor. "I didn't know you were coming by today."

The older man watched her with his infinitely patient eyes. "What are you doing up here?"

Ginny considered lying, but decided against it. "Snooping."

He stepped into the room after a brief hesitation. "I would imagine the letter you received from Professor Dumbledore would be enough of a reminder of Sirius."

"Well, I'm not really looking for anything like that," Ginny admitted.

"Oh?"

"I was in a detention recently with our new Defense professor," Ginny said, watching for any sign of recognition on Remus's face. He didn't disappoint; understanding flooded his features. "Do you know Professor Wrightman?"

"If you're in here because of her, I think you know the answer to that question," Remus said, not unkindly.

"Well, actually, I'm here because I'm confused about her," Ginny said, hoping he would shed some light on the situation in the face of the lack of physical evidence.

"I never want to discourage a student's curiosity, but Professor Wrightman's private life is not your concern," Remus said, echoing the professor's words from just a few days before.

"Then you think I could find something about her private life in here?" Ginny asked.

Remus watched her carefully. "No."

"But you know her," Ginny went on, knowing she was pressing her luck.

"Yes, and if you want to know about her life, I suggest you ask her," Remus said.

"I did. She wasn't exactly receptive." Though, to be fair, she had just had a very private memory wrenched to the forefront of her mind.

"What did you ask her about?"

"How she and Sirius knew each other."

He looked confused, as if this weren't the question he had expected. "The Wrightmans and the Blacks were old allies."

It took a moment for the significance of that statement to sink in, and when it did, Ginny felt like a moron. "The Wrightmans? The Old Family Wrightmans?"



Remus nodded.

"I didn't put that together," Ginny said, mind racing. The Wrightmans were one of the oldest, most respected, and wealthiest families in Europe. Their power stretched from Asia to America. "So her engagement to Sirius was about strengthening the family connection?"

"I'm surprised you know about that. The contract dissolved when they were sixteen," Remus said.

Ginny's mouth fell open. "They had a magical contract?"

"For an arranged marriage, I believe," Remus said, nodding as if this wasn't a huge deal.

"You believe?"

"Sirius didn't mention it until a couple of years ago."

"Really?" She had been planning to ask something else, but that seemed so odd.

"Sirius didn't talk about his family much, nor Gertrude, who I never saw him with in school," he said. "Which is why I believe you ought to ask her these questions."

"But—" The memory she had seen was so personal. "If they were both members of the old families and the contract was magical, she was connected to Sirius until the day he died."

"We trust her." His tone brokered no argument.

"But the relationship remains. A magical marriage contract cannot be broken," Ginny said. It was one of those things every child knew, and it was the reason breaking such an agreement was such a taboo. "The magic never fades."

Remus nodded. "It is as much a liability for her as it was for Sirius."

“How, unless—” Figuring this out aloud was yielding more and more questions. “Is Professor Wrightman the head of her family?”

Remus nodded. “Her parents died in the mid-eighties, and she has no siblings.”

It made sense, of course. The Blacks had been hugely powerful in the seventies, with five children—two males and three beautiful girls to marry into other families. They had probably looked like one of the most secure old families. Uniting with the Wrightmans through their heirs would have been politically savvy. Yet the contract was dissolved as much as it could be (which wasn’t much at all), and the Wrightmans remained strong while the Black crumbled.

“What the hell is she doing teaching at Hogwarts?” Ginny wanted to know. The heads of the old families didn’t have to work. They were on boards and committees. They had old money to go with their old names, and the Wrightmans were known for their various estates and land holdings. They had even owned a Quidditch team some years before, though they had been sold in the early nineties.

“That is her business,” he said, shutting down that line of conversation.

“Do you know her well?” Ginny asked. She had been in his year, a fellow Prefect, and knew Sirius.

Something flashed quickly through Remus’s eyes before he shook his head. “Gertrude didn’t like me.”

Ginny bristled in the tidy room. “Because you were a werewolf?”

“Because she thought I was weak.” He smiled wryly as he looked around the room. “As far as I could tell, the only people she ever respected were Sirius and Lily. It was after Lily and James’ deaths that we got to know one another.”

“Harry’s mum?”

“Yes, but that really is you professor’s story to tell.”

“You trust her.” This woman who threw away Sirius for her family.

“She sat beside me at many funerals,” Remus said, as if that explained everything instead of igniting a dozen more questions in Ginny’s mind. Questions, she knew, that would have to be asked later because Remus was ushering her out of the strangely vacant room.

--

The fifth morning at Grimmauld Place, Ginny spent a happy breakfast alone with her father, who had returned with her mother the previous day.

“Is everyone still sleeping?” Ginny asked as she poured herself a bowl of cereal.

“Actually, most of them are at work, and Ron went with your mother to arrange some things at the Burrow,” Mr. Weasley said.

“Oh,” Ginny said. “Well, it’s nice to have breakfast with you.”

“Actually, if you don’t mind, I thought you might come to work with me too,” Mr. Weasley said with a smile.

Instantly suspicious—after all, her parents hadn’t let her go anywhere public recently, even with one of them—Ginny asked, “Is everyone okay?”

“What? Yes, of course,” Mr. Weasley said, clearly surprised by the question.

“Then why are you and Mum clearing out the house?”

Mr. Weasley gave a small smile and set down his paper. “We were trying not to be obvious.”

She smiled.

“There’s a meeting that we don’t want any of you to interrupt,” Mr. Weasley said, his façade of happiness slipping a bit to reveal the tired man he had become in the recent months. Ginny felt as if she could see him age each day, and fought the urge to wrap her arms around him and keep him right where he was forever.

“A meeting that doesn’t involve you?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

Well, that was interesting enough that she certainly wanted to throw a tantrum and stay, if only to glean bits of information from overheard conversation. If her parents had gone to such extraordinary lengths to keep her and Ron—for they were the only two non-Order members of the family now—from hearing the meeting, it meant that Harry was going to be the topic of discussion.

It also meant that there was no way her dad would let her stay, so she decided to relent. “Are we going to your office?”

Mr. Weasley’s lined face relaxed into a large smile. “Yes. I need to check on Perkins. He found a strange plant.”

“Does it do anything cool like rearrange facial features?” Ginny asked, trying to lighten the mood. It worked. Her father spent the rest of the morning—from the breakfast table all the way to his office—discussing the strangest and most interesting things he had ever confiscated.

The Ministry, Ginny had to admit, looked much more busy than she remembered; the harried looks on everyone’s faces only added to the effect.

The last time Ginny had been here, of course, was during the big fight in the Department of Mysteries—not exactly a normal night. She still had the “Rescue Mission” visitors badge she had collected that night pinned to the inside of her school bag. It was a good reminder.

Then she and her dad reached his office, where a stack of parchment rested precariously on his already-messy desk, and Ginny realized

that the long hours her father was working were not about to end any time soon. She had known that already, she supposed, but it was another thing to suddenly see the amount of work that lay in front of him.

Mr. Weasley slid around his desk. "Sit down, and I'll—"

A knock on the open door turned both of their heads. A young man who couldn't have been older than Bill stood in the doorway, politely waiting.

"Yes?" Mr. Weasley said.

"Hello Mr. Weasley," greeted stranger. "I'm Sabastian Smith."

"I remember you from the integration meeting," Mr. Weasley assured him. "We had a chat about Muggle automobiles."

The man's eyes lit up. "Yes. That was a fascinating topic. I've done more research and—well, that's for another time, I suppose. Director Allen sent me to ask if you could help us with a little problem we're having."

"Little?"

"It might ruin four rooms at most," the man said with a smile, and Ginny, who had liked him on sight, now had a full-blown friend crush on Sebastian Smith. (Meaning, of course, that she wanted to be his friend).

"Four?" Mr. Weasley asked, rubbing his cheek. "I'll have to see what's happening myself."

"You'll love it. We were using a Muggle conveyer belt," Sebastian said. "It was working just fine, but we think the magical modifications we made warped it beyond repair."

"Are you trying to combine Muggle and Magical technology?" Ginny couldn't help but ask excitedly.

Sebastian grinned at her. "We may or may not."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Sebastian, this is my daughter Ginny Weasley. Ginny, this is Sebastian Smith, an Unspeakable," Mr. Weasley said, making quick introductions as he grabbed a few things from his desk.

"Your daughter the destroyer of my room?" Sebastian asked, though his good cheer never wavered as he held out a hand. "Pleased to meet you, Ginny."

She shook his hand. "I am sorry about the damage done to your department."

He waved that off. "Wasn't your fault. Wasn't anyone's fault. It was a collision of forces that happened to meet at the center of one of the greatest research facilities in the world. We learned a lot."

"You did?" Ginny may have only been in the Department of Mysteries for a short period—most of it fighting—but she wanted nothing more than to have the chance to study the mysteries this man mentioned so casually. Meeting someone so close to the department only made Ginny that much more eager to ensure a place in the ranks of Unspeakables, examining brains and veils and that one locked door.

"Yep. But I can't tell you what. Too mysterious," he said.

"Sebastian," came a deep, unhappy voice from just beyond him.

"Ignore Iago. He's an unhappy man," Sebastian said. "But we would like your assistance as soon as possible, Mr. Weasley."

Mr. Weasley glanced worried at Ginny. "I have to go."

"That's alright. I know you're at work," Ginny assured him, not understanding the issue.

Sebastian let her know the problem: "Although you've already fought inside it, my Department is restricted."

“You’ll have to stay here while I handle this,” he said, watching her with nervous hope that pulled her from her musings. “Your mother will kill me if she finds out I left you alone.”

Ginny smiled. “I won’t rat you out, Dad.”

“Always knew I could count on you, Ginny,” he said, moving out the door with Sebastian Smith.

“Keep trying to know,” was Sebastian’s strange farewell as the pair left.

Mr. Weasley popped his head back in a moment later. “And don’t try to sneak home.”

“Promise,” she said.

But after a few minutes, Ginny had grown bored spinning in the chair and poking around her dad’s office. She considered going back to Grimmauld Place, but knew that she would find more information out about the meeting later when the twins’ bugs—cockroach-like things that recorded all sound in a room—would give her a better report than if she had her ear pressed against the kitchen door.

But she couldn’t just sit around this office all day. It wasn’t like her dad would punish her for roaming a bit; he knew how restless she was.

So after writing him a quick note that she would meet him for lunch in the cafeteria at half past eleven, Ginny left the office.

She hadn’t had a plan of action, so she was as surprised as anyone to find herself Minister Bones’s office floor alone that morning, having been told by the lift operator that the Minister was out and that the waiting area was the only public access point. She stepped into the room, not sure what had brought her there.

“Ginny?” a familiar voice asked the moment she entered.

She turned automatically, placing the voice only a moment before she saw Percy standing in the doorway of an empty conference room. Ginny's stomach clenched. Writing to him had been one thing, but seeing him here, blank-faced and not particularly apologetic, was another matter entirely.

"Hi Percy," she said.

"Hi," he said, looking more uncomfortable than ever with his tensely perfect posture that could never quite make him look as refined as Bill. "What are you doing here?"

"I dunno," she said, shrugging. "I came here with Dad, but he had a meeting, and I just ended up here."

"Oh. That's good," he said. Ginny was glad to see that he was as awkward as ever. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," she lied, still a few meters away from him and willing to close the distance. "Thanks for my birthday present, by the way."

He nodded. "I read your thank you letter."

It had been more than a thank you letter, and they both knew it.

"Sorry I didn't reply," he said, pushing his glasses higher on his nose. "Busy time here, you know."

"No. I don't," she said shortly, shrugging one arm.

Percy motioned around the lavish room. "With You-Know-Who's return, the Minister—"

"Voldemort," Ginny said, cutting him off and perversely enjoying the way her flinched.

"You should be careful—"

She ignored him. "Proper nouns help eliminate confusion. You taught me that."



He looked exasperated. “Be that as it may, saying You-Know-Who’s name only serves to spread fear.”

“Fear?” she asked. “Just last year you wrote me a very charming letter explaining exactly how impossible it was that Voldemort”—he flinched again—“was back. Are you retracting that statement?”

He didn’t like that at all, she could tell.

“You couldn’t begin to understand the politics involved in my work,” he said. “I thought it was in your best interests—”

“To have you leave?” Ginny asked, butting off her tall, proud brother. “To watch Mum cry for you? To see Dad’s broken heart? To have an empty chair at the table?”

“You’re being melodramatic,” he said, waving her off, which really made her angry.

“Ron was in the hospital for weeks!” she snapped. “And you didn’t even bother to write!”

This seemed to really shake him up. Well, good. It should. Ginny hadn’t realized how mad she was about that until this moment, but now, with it all pouring out, she could hardly restrain herself.

“I meant to visit,” Percy said, straightening her shirt uncomfortably, “but the Ministry was going through a complete overhaul, and I needed to brief—”

“Excuses are for liars and cheats,” Ginny said cuttingly. “You didn’t teach me that one. That was Great Aunt Muriel.”

“I didn’t do anything to you,” he said, sounding like he thought he was being completely reasonable. As if her narrow self-interest was her only concern. Did he forget that she’d been sorted into Gryffindor and not Slytherin? Stupid ponce.

“You left.” You broke my heart and trust.

“Mum forgave me,” he reasoned, though he sounded unconvinced of that fact.

“Well bully for her.”

“I have done good work with Minister Fudge and now Minister Bones,” Percy said, sounding like he was reciting from a script. “We’ve completed four of the twenty goals we set at the beginning of the year. We’ve reorganized the communication relays between Aurors and the Ministry, including the eight new divisions that have been created to combat this impending issue.”

“Impending issue?” Ginny repeated. “You think the psycho who attacked me as an eleven year old is just another issue that you can combat with a well-organized checklist?”

He bristled. “We’ve made great strides—”

“You’ve appeased the masses and covered up a murder,” Ginny said.

Percy had never been a very good actor, and he couldn’t keep the surprise and pain from his face. It was the second emotion that made Ginny pause. Despite everything, Percy had valued Fudge, and the Minister’s death must have hurt him brother badly.

“I’m sorry about Fudge,” she said.

His posture grew tight. “How did you know?”

She shrugged. “All night Wizengamot and a unanimous decision with not a single remark from Fudge? It was too smooth.”

He looked at her for a long time before he finally said, “We’re still making progress.”

“A Ministry of scared workers isn’t going to stop him,” she said, just as quietly and adamantly. “We both know who is.”

Percy looked upset. "You're still deluded by that nonsense Dumbledore spouts."

"It's not nonsense!"

"Believing that a sixteen year old boy with average marks is the only one capable of ending this terror is madness," Percy said. "Even Minister Bones thinks it's too much to ask of Harry."

"Oh really? Why don't you have her ask her niece what she thinks sometime?"

"The Minister is a smart woman."

"I don't know why I came here," Ginny said, turning away. She was surprised by the hand on her arm.

He looked embarrassed and retracted his hand as soon as she looked at him.

"I'm glad you came," Percy said haltingly. "I've missed you."

She looked up at her tall, smart brother. "Then why don't you come home?"

In the beautiful office of the Minister of Magic, Percy looked like he fit in with his clean, crisp robes and tired eyes.

"I'm trying to make up for past mistakes," he said. "I'm doing good work here."

"We don't want good work," Ginny said honestly. "We just want you to come home."

"I haven't earned that," he said, and Ginny was violently reminded of Percy as she remembered him from before Hogwarts, when he spent play time helping their mum clean up and organized their Dad's papers, waiting for them to tell him exactly how good he was.

“You don’t have to earn a place in your family,” Ginny said. “An apology would be enough.”

She made it back to her father’s office before Mr. Weasley, and shredded her note. No one needed to know about her visit.

--

With all of the anticipation surrounding Harry’s unscheduled arrival—Mrs. Weasley could only say that Dumbledore would know when it was appropriate—Ginny was surprised to be the only up when he stumbled out of the fireplace, landing with a thud on the Asian carpet.

“Ow,” he said, rubbing his shoulder.

Having jumped and spun around when she heard the noise, Ginny was surprised and pleased to see Harry lying on the ground instead of some other Order member, but she could not keep herself from asking, “You always have to make a dramatic entrance, don’t you, Harry?”

“Nice to see you too, Ginny.” Harry smiled as he pushed himself off the ground, wincing and clutching his shoulder briefly.

“Is your shoulder okay?” she asked, lurching forward to touch it gently.

He held it tightly. “No.”

“Decided to face another dragon, did you?” she asked, noticing the swelling and bruising. It also looked dislocated.

“Sadly, there were no Hungarian Horntails available, so I settled for Chinese Fireball,” Harry said, grimacing. “Bit of a let down, really.”

Ginny laughed as she raised her wand, but Harry flinched away, prompting her to say, “I’d like to think I’m less scary than a Basilisk or a Dark Lord, but keep reacting like that to my wand and I’ll have an inflated sense of intimidation.”

He relaxed a touch. “I’ve seen your Bat-Bogey Hex.”

"But not my healing spells, huh?" Ginny asked, taking his hand and pulling the injured arm straight down.

Harry faked moving further away. "I've had healing spells vanish my entire arm."

"I promise I'm more competent than Lockhart. Relax," she said, poking the joint. "And if you're looking for Hermione, you're out of luck. She isn't here yet."

"I'm not. I trust you," he said, weariness apparent in his voice as he relaxed while she worked to ease the swelling.

"Stay awake," she said, setting the shoulder with a flick. "Concussions are dull to heal."

Rotating his arm, Harry asked, "How'd you learn to do that?"

"McGonagall."

"Ah," he said, as if that explained everything. "Thanks."

"Not a problem. Couldn't let you just lie there in pain," she said.

Harry sighed. "It's good to see you."

"You too, mystery man." She liked everything about him, even the way he tiredly looked pleased to be in the same room as her. It was a little disconcerting. "We were wondering if you were planning to join us at all."

He shrugged. "I always planned to, but things were more complicated than I thought they'd be."

Ginny nodded, eyeing the bruises along his neck. "Well, I wanted a midnight snack. You could join me and tell me aggravatingly little about the secret mission you apparently just finished."

He smiled. "Your mum didn't make any pudding, did she?"

"In fact, you are talking to one of only three people to have found the pudding's hidden location," Ginny said, not bothering to mention how bad he looked right then, thin and beat up and in desperate need of sleep. He knew it. He didn't need her bringing it up. He just needed a treat.

"Have I mentioned how much I like you?" Harry asked with a tired smile, making Ginny's heart jump a bit.

A few minutes later, they were settled at the table with a spoon in hand, sharing stolen bites of pudding when Harry asked, "What are you doing up, anyway? I thought everyone would be asleep."

"Only the boring people," she said, happily scooping up more pudding.

"Then I should find a bed," he said, though he made no move to do so.

Ginny laughed. "As if anyone has ever called you boring."

"It's good that you were the one who found me," he said, resting his spoon on the table. "Everyone else would have freaked out and asked questions."

"Well they like you more than I do."

He laughed. "Nah, it's because you know there's worse things than showing up in the middle of the night a little sore."

She did, and he did.

"It's really nice to be here," Harry said, looking around. "Especially now that Grimmauld Place looks about a hundred times less evil."

Ginny nodded, though the silent picture of Mrs. Black that she had been avoiding all holiday popped to the forefront of her mind.

"I bet Spinner's End was nice too," Ginny said.

"I bet it was, but I haven't been there yet," Harry said, making her look at him in surprise. "Hermione's probably having the best time."

"With her parents?"

"They took her to the Caribbean," Harry said. Ginny remembered Hermione mentioning that a while ago, something about how now that her parents felt they were missing out on the magical parts of her life, they wanted the Muggle parts to seem especially great. Hermione had been a little sad relaying the story.

"Well, with all my brothers here, it feels like a party," Ginny said, setting down her spoon. "Can't be too disappointed."

"I'm not."

"Hey!" Ginny said, suddenly glancing around. "Where's Herpo?"

"He and Hedwig are arriving tomorrow, along with my trunk," Harry said.

"Oh good." Her relief was surprising, but that cat was absolutely adorable. "If he were with you, you probably would have ended up with fewer bruises."

"Or more. His talent for deflecting spells from hitting him doesn't always work," Harry said. "So sometimes, he throws me out of the way."

"I would love to see that. Bring him to the next D.A. meeting."

"Or sure. That would be a blast, being tossed around by a kitten."

Ginny grinned while Harry re-covered the bowl and went to return it to its hiding spot. "Your mum's going to kill us for eating this."

"We'll have to lie and say it wasn't us," Ginny said.

Harry laughed. "Anything is possible if you have enough nerve, right?"

She smiled back. "Exactly."

Plus, Mrs. Weasley always made two bread puddings, one that she expected her kids to find and another, better hidden one that Ginny left untouched.

They trudged up to their rooms together, waving silently when they parted ways and Ginny went into the room she normally shared with Hermione. Ginny slipped into her clean, crisp sheets and lay back against her pillows, Harry's smile replaying itself in her mind. He was here. She couldn't sleep.

--

"Ginny! Oh Ginny!" Fred called into her room at an hour that demanded that she throw a shoe at his head. "Time to wake up, Ginny!"

"Go away." She was too tired to find the compulsory shoe.

"But Harry's here. Harry. The love of your life."

"He'll still be here at a normal hour," she mumbled back, burrowing her face further into her pillow. But Fred and George weren't that easy to deter; they dragged her out of bed by the arm, letting her hit the carpet with a thump.

"You're so mean," she whined, resigned to the fact that she would have to start her day now, as the prospect of more sleep was taken from her. It was moments like this when she was glad that she had a naturally happy disposition. Sure, she hadn't wanted to leave her bed, but now that she had, she would make the most of it. And get back at the twins when possible.

"There she is," George said when Ginny made her way into the kitchen. Bill, Charlie, the twins, Remus, Ron, and Harry were seated around the kitchen table eating the piles of food Mrs. Weasley was still adding to.



“Do you know she didn’t want to get up to see you, Harry?” George asked, filling his voice with horror.

“Well, he is rather boring,” Ginny said, causing Harry to grin as she sat beside him.

“Guess her thing with Baron Ramsey is more serious than we thought if he could end her crippling crush on Harry,” Fred said, making her glare as she turned to her. “Or is it Duncan that unseated Harry in your heart?”

Before Ginny could respond, Ron was grumbling through his food, “He’s a Slytherin. It’s uncalled for.”

“Ginny, do you have a new boyfriend? You never mentioned it,” Mrs. Weasley said, making Ginny glare at her brothers, who smiled in triumph.

“No, Mum. I’d tell you if I did.”

“She went on a date with Duncan Moran, a seventh year, but a different seventh year named Baron ended that fling,” Bill ever-so-helpfully piped in.

“Seventh year? Isn’t that a bit old for you?” her mum asked.

“Bill and his girlfriend are almost a decade apart, aren’t they?” Ginny asked, looking innocently at her oldest brother, who waved her off.

“Well, I hope you didn’t hurt that boy’s feelings,” Mrs. Weasley said, clearly having already had it out with Bill about the age discrepancy and deciding to address it later.

“It was just one date, Mum. Nothing serious. And Baron and I aren’t dating at all,” she said.

“Was he the Keeper?” Charlie asked Bill. “We didn’t approve of him. We wanted Duncan, the Chaser’s son.”

“Duncan’s done,” Ginny said shortly.

“Old news,” Fred added. Harry was looking like this was all too much to take in.

“Next thing I know, Baron Ramsey will be invited to Christmas dinner,” Ron grumbled.

Her brothers might have continued their antics forever if Mrs. Weasley hadn’t loudly dropped her spoon into the pan and asked, “Ramsey?”

Everyone looked at her, but it was Ginny who nodded. “Baron Ramsey, but he’s just a friend, too. They’re having a go—”

“Johannes and Rohea’s son?” Mrs. Weasley went on, and the boys shared strange looks.

“I... don’t know his parents’ names,” Ginny said, eying her mother strangely. “We aren’t that close yet.”

“Yet, she says,” Ron muttered.

Mrs. Weasley picked up her utensil again in a hurry. “I just wondered.”

“Why?”

“Seventh years have a lot of work. I’m surprised he found time for a girlfriend.”

“We aren’t dating,” Ginny said.

“Well, much as I love hearing about Ginny’s love life, I want to know where Harry was. When did you get here, anyway?” Fred said, effectively shifting the conversation to Harry and all the things that he couldn’t tell them. Even Ginny was distracted, though she made a mental note to ask her mother about this later.

“Last night. Middle of the night, actually,” Harry said.

“Your things arrived this morning, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said. “Dobby is arranging your room now.”

“Oh. Thank you,” Harry said.

“So were you doing anything stupid and dangerous?” Fred asked with a grin.

Harry smiled. “No.”

“Good,” George said, surprising the table. “We told you not to do anything stupid until we could be there too.”

“Or just don’t do it at all,” Bill said, proving exactly how little he actually knew Harry.

“Have you met Harry?” George asked incredulously.

“He doesn’t choose to live like a character in an insane story,” Fred said.

“It just happens,” George finished. The twins had played Beaters to Harry’s Seeker for four years, seen him endure being called the heir of Slytherin and watched him lead the D.A. They knew their place was beside him, protecting him from real world Bludgers, not in front of him pretending he was an invalid. Bill and Charlie would realize that eventually, too. They were cool like that. It made Ginny feel a surge of pride for her brothers.

--

Harry decided to stay at Grimmauld Place for the holiday, which just meant that he and Ron sequestered themselves in a library in this house rather than Spinner’s End, talking in muffled tones about things that even her parents weren’t allowed to know.

Sitting in her room finishing her essay for Transfiguration, Ginny absently wondered if Harry knew that he actively isolated himself. Probably not. He did it so mindlessly—shutting out the rest of the

world as he talked to Hermione or Ron or, sometimes, Ginny—that it seemed unpracticed.

A knock on the door made Ginny glance up. “Come in.”

“Hello, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said, walking in carrying two shopping bags. “Working on an assignment?”

“Boring thing on mind magic,” Ginny assured her, rolling up the scroll and shoving it in the drawer of the large desk.

“Bill was always interested in that field,” Mrs. Weasley said, but despite her words, she sounded preoccupied. The older woman had lost some weight recently, though it wasn’t through lack of cooking. As Ginny knew from eleven years in the Burrow, her mother liked to cook when nervous, but rarely ate. When Ginny’s dad went to Azkaban that one time, he returned to a four-course meal that Mrs. Weasley didn’t touch as she fussed over him.

It was disconcerting to see her mother hurting, and know she could do little help beyond expressing concern.

“You all right, Mum?”

Mrs. Weasley nodded. “Of course. Of course. I bought you some things.”

“Really?” Ginny asked curiously. “For Christmas?”

“They’re practical,” Mrs. Weasley said, holding out the bags, which Ginny took a little bewildered.

“Thanks.”

“You can open them now,” Mrs. Weasley said, nodding for her to go again. Not wanting to appear ungrateful, Ginny pushed her concerns aside for the moment to go through the bags, and smiled when she recognized the contents.

“Bras?” Ginny asked.

"I noticed you were running low when I did your wash, and I remembered the conversation we had at the end of the break," Mrs. Weasley said. "About you being a woman now."

"Oh, Mum," Ginny said, shaking her head. "Thank you. I did need them."

"I made sure to get you a few tan ones to wear under your uniform, two for sports, and one black bra, which is always necessary," Mrs. Weasley said, either pointing or pulling them out.

"And this?" Ginny asked with grin, holding up a bright pink bra.

Mrs. Weasley 's face lightened a bit as she said, "Well, every girls needs one fun undergarment."

Ginny's grin changed into a smile, and she couldn't help but embrace her. "This is great, Mum. Really thoughtful."

Mrs. Weasley beamed.

"And thanks for not having me open this on Christmas morning," Ginny said, holding the bags. "The twins would've had a field day."

"I thought your father might not approve the fun undergarment," Mrs. Weasley said with a conspiratorial smile.

"No, I don't think he would," Ginny said, smiling as she remembered her father's response when he had found out she started to shave her legs. Ginny didn't doubt that her mother had gotten the size right. Mrs. Weasley had such a knack for measures that Bill and Charlie used to joke that she must have sneaked into their rooms with a tape measure in the middle of the night.

"I also," Mrs. Weasley said, sitting on the bed and patting the space beside her, "wanted to talk to you about Baron Ramsey."

Ginny set the bags on her dresser and leaned on the desk. "Oh, Mum. Charlie was only joking about that. I'm really not dating him."

"But you are friends," Mrs. Weasley said, clearly still believing that Ginny was dating Baron and refusing to admit it.

"We've spoken more in the past month than in the past six years combined."

"You're becoming close," Mrs. Weasley said, nodding, which frustrated Ginny.

"It doesn't mean we're going to date, Mum. I have a lot of male friends."

"I want you to be careful," Mrs. Weasley said, sounding stern but not confrontational as she walked over to the dresser and began putting the bras neatly away.

"Mum, I remember the talk we had last summer quite well," Ginny said, hoping that this would not drift into another sex talk. Her mother had been characteristically blunt about the consequences of poor choices, and it hadn't been the horrifying experience that people always supposed it would be. Still, it did not bear repeating.

"I don't mean physically," Mrs. Weasley said, shutting the drawer and turning.

"Then... I don't understand," Ginny said, moving from against the desk to rest in its chair.

"The Weasleys are a good, proud family," her mum said. "People underestimate them."

"I'm sorry. I don't—"

"Don't let him treat you like you don't belong," Mrs. Weasley went on, her brown eyes stern. "You're as good and strong and proud and pure as any of their friends."

The final word caught Ginny off guard. "Since when have you cared at all about purity?"

"I don't, dear, but they will."

Ginny watched her mother quietly before saying, "I know better than to let anyone's bad opinion hurt me."

"I know you do," Mrs. Weasley said, patting Ginny's knee. "But I wanted to remind you."

This had to be one of the strangest conversations Ginny had ever had with her mother, and as it dissolved from that point to gossiping about school and her date with Duncan, Ginny decided to let it go without much further examination.

--

Christmas morning, Ginny was jolted out of sleep by Fred loudly yelling, "Steamroller!" before jumping on her bed and rolling over her.

"Geroff! Geroff!" she yelled, laughing and gasping for breath at the same time. Their father had spent a particularly memorable afternoon with his four youngest children taking them to a Muggle construction site. Ginny had been small enough for her dad to carry her everywhere, but the twins darted around too quickly to follow. When he found them, George was climbing behind the wheel of a steamroller while Fred was trying to convince Ron to stand just in front of it because they "wanted to try something."

Their punishment had lasted one week; the tradition of waking Ginny by squashing her remained to this day.

"There couldn't possibly be a worse way to wake up," Ginny muttered, sliding back to sit up.

"That sounds like a challenge," Fred said, lying next to her.

"Almost as if she were mocking us," George agreed, tossing her red Weasley jumper right at her feet.

"We have a project for the summer."

Ginny rested against the headboard, hands burrowed in the warmth of her mother's knitted jumper. "I bet you I could think of a horrible way to wake someone up before you could."

Fred and George shared one of those Twin Looks before saying in unison, "No deal."

"Nope. The ideas already planted in my head. Can't go back now," Ginny said, slipping out of bed and grabbing some clothes from her dresser before heading to the attached bathroom.

"We'll have to reinforce the wards on our rooms when we stay in a house with her," Fred said as she shut the door.

By the time Ginny changed, brushed her teeth and hair, and rejoined them, the twins were lazily playing with a neon-green ball that ticked as they threw it back and forth. They were already sporting their Christmas jumpers, and were obviously happy to see that she had put hers on as well.

"If that's going to explode, let's play in the living room," Ginny said, shoving Fred toward the door.

"It won't," he said.

"Not yet," George added, holding it carefully in his left hand. "We can't figure out how to make it explode on a specified person instead of based on time."

Ginny filed the problem away in her head to think about later, and asked, "Was there a reason you woke me up or were you just missing my sparkling personality?"

"It's Christmas," they said together, and then scampered off to wake the next person. Within the hour, Ron, Harry, Ginny, Bill, Charlie, Remus, the twins, and the Weasleys parents were all sitting around the Christmas tree wearing their multi-colored jumpers.



Over the years, Christmas had changed in the Weasley house. Growing up, all the kids had picked one name from their father's old hat, and that person had become their Christmas project. They would craft one large gift to give them on Christmas morning after they put on the traditional Weasley jumper folded nicely at the foot of their beds. Now, with more of the kids employed than not, presents flowed rather freely.

"Who's going first?" Charlie asked, rubbing his bleary eyes.

"Alphabetically, Dad should," Bill said.

Arthur Weasley sat on the loveseat with their mother, one arm around her shoulders and his free hand holding a steaming cup of tea. Having house-elves was very convenient early in the morning (and would be when it came to the clean up as well, Ginny supposed).

"Mine first!" Ginny said, running up to find the lumpy package that Hermione had helped her compile, which she immediately gave to her dad. "Merry Christmas."

Arthur had absolutely no idea what a pencil was nor how the little crank-like metal thing was supposed to make it work like a quill and ink, but Ginny and he spent an amusingly long time trying to reenact the motions Hermione had taught her before Harry stepped in to help.

"They're actually really useful," Harry said after one of the original pencils broke in half. "In case you don't have ink or something."

"This is marvelous, Ginny," Mr. Weasley beamed, hugging his daughter. "Advanced Muggle technology."

Harry shook his head. "Actually it's not—"

"Arthur, I need to talk to you!" yelled the unmistakable voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt from the kitchen.

In an instant, Mr. Weasley was dashing toward the kitchen, everyone else following to listen in as Shacklebolt and their father conversed.

“There’s been an attack, and we need you to go to the house,” Shacklebolt said, and everyone gave up the pretense of not listening in favor of flooding into the kitchen and huddling around the Floo.

“The Dark Mark?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“Yes, and the politicians are all over this one, blocking the Aurors.”

“Then how will I be able to go?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“We found a Muggle artifact, which means you can enter with the first team,” Shacklebolt said. “Bring Lupin, if he’s with you.”

“Remus?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“It’s the Covington Estate,” Shacklebolt said. Mrs. Weasley looked quickly at Ginny, who couldn’t catch her mother’s eye again afterward.

“We’ll be right there,” Mr. Weasley said, standing and sharing a look with Remus.

“The password is Thucydides. I am with the Muggle Prime Minister now,” Shacklebolt said, pulling out of the fire just as quickly as his low, booming voice had pierced their Christmas morning.

“Mr. Weasley, I’d like to go with you,” Harry said, taking a step forward.

It was Molly Weasley who said, “Harry, you can’t. This is Ministry business.”

He remained focused on Mr. Weasley. “I want to know what’s happening.”

Mr. Weasley put a hand on his shoulder. “And I’ll be sure to tell you, son. But the Ministry can’t know that we’re with you, and we can’t risk your safety.”

Harry looked obstinate. “If I can help--”

"You can help by staying here for now," Remus said quietly. And while Ginny knew that her friend had a dozen more arguments about why he should join them, he surprised her by letting the issue go, nodding just once. Mr. Weasley and Remus left quickly, pushing through the Floo and leaving Harry Potter behind in the Grimmauld Place kitchen to worry with Mrs. Weasley and her children, presents untouched in the adjacent room.

"I can't just sit here," Harry said, shaking his head and leaving the room, closely followed by Ron and the twins. Bill and Charlie shared a look before the former addressed their mother.

"Mum, I want to be here, but Fleur—"

"Oh. Yes, of course," Mrs. Weasley said, standing. "Go."

"I'll come back soon." He hugged his much smaller mother, put a hand on her shoulder, and left via Floo.

"You want to leave too?" Ginny asked Charlie quietly as Bill left.

He shook his head, watching her.

"Ginny," Mrs. Weasley said, sitting and taking her daughter's small hand in hers.

"I'm fine, Mum," Ginny said, holding her mother's hand tightly, if only to reassure her that Ginny was safe and solid and there. "I'm just worried about Dad."

Mrs. Weasley took a breath, glancing at Charlie, who nodded. "The Covington Estate is the main home of the Ramsey family."

"What?" the word slipped past Ginny's unmoving lips

Mrs. Weasley sympathetically said, "Your friend Baron, it's his family's home."

"No," Ginny said, shaking her head and retracting her hand. "The Ramseys are an old, pureblood family."

“So were the McKinnons and Boneses,” Charlie said quietly, speaking the taboo names in the clean, pretty kitchen.

Ginny went on, “The Ramseys are Slytherins—”

“Ginny,” Mrs. Weasley said again in her kindest voice.

“We don’t know anything yet,” Ginny said, taking a breath and sorting through her emotions as she blocked out the images conjured by her mother’s sympathetic voice. “I won’t worry until I hear more.”

Mrs. Weasley reclaimed her hand, giving a squeeze. “We’ll be here.”

Charlie didn’t say anything comforting, for which Ginny was grateful. Her gift for compartmentalizing her emotions, pushing aside distracting ones and focusing on the positive, had never served her better. But one kind word from her brother might have shattered that focus, and she couldn’t afford to be a whimpering child right then.

--

Ginny’s dad and Remus returned a little after seven o’clock that night, having spent eight hours at the site. They stumbled out of the Floo, dust covered and weary. From the landing, Ginny watched her dad and Remus from a distance, trying to subdue the painful knots that clenched in her stomach up through her chest.

“Arthur?” Mrs. Weasley asked, apron still on; she had been cooking for hours, despite Dobby’s protests. “Are you—”

“Molly,” he said simply, embracing his wife.

Ginny’s fear was irrational, she thought. She didn’t even know Baron that well. Almost not at all, but he had been kind to her during their short acquaintance, and she had enjoyed walking with him from the Dungeons and after her Quidditch match. Still, as she walked down to join her parents, a thrill of concern shot through her for the tall, handsome bloke who seemed to live in a different era.

“Dad?” Ginny asked, making her parents turn.

Her father’s eyes softened, and he held on to Molly’s hand.

“I need to go talk to Harry,” Remus said, excusing himself from the room.

“What happened, Dad?” Ginny asked.

Her father hesitated.

“I deserve the truth,” Ginny entreated, looking first at her father then her mother, who nodded, which was enough for Arthur.

“The Death Eaters attacked ten families. Two wizarding,” her dad said, and Ginny suddenly fought the urge to throw up.

“The Ramseys?” Ginny asked in a hollow voice.

“Yes.” He nodded. “The parents were killed.”

It felt like a blow to Ginny’s chest as she watched her own parents try to comfort her with soft, loving looks.

“Their children, your friend Baron and his sister Gretchen, are alive,” he went on quickly. “I spoke to them myself.”

“Remus!” cried a young, female voice as Nymphadora Tonks stepped out of the fire and tripped, nearly knocking Ginny over. Remus came in, flanked by Harry, Ron, and the twins. Charlie stood quietly in the corner. Remus and Tonks spoke quickly and quietly, moving to the living room off the kitchen.

“Ginny,” Mr. Weasley said tiredly. “There’s more.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“One of your classmates was killed,” Mr. Weasley said.

Terror pierced through her as she thought of her Muggleborn best mate Kerney. "Who?"

"A Hufflepuff third year named Wendy Tibbals," her father said, and Ginny was torn between empathy and relief at not knowing the girl personally, hating the second emotion as soon as she realized it.

"You talked to Hermione, right?" Harry asked, speaking up for the first time.

"Yes," Mr. Weasley nodded. "She'll be joining us in a few days, and her parents' home is now being warded."

Harry nodded gratefully, but Ginny couldn't help but notice that his eyes were hardening into that stupid look of resolve that he had had before running off to the Ministry, as if he were already accepting responsibility for this attack and these awful murders.

"Ginny," Mrs. Weasley said, putting a hand on her daughter's wrist. "I'll send Baron and his sister flowers and a note."

As if that would help two grieving teenagers, but Ginny nodded her thanks, knowing that it wasn't her mother's fault that the methods of expressing condolences were so insufficient.

"I made dinner," Mrs. Weasley said. "We should all eat."

"I'm not hungry," Ginny said, shaking her head. She needed to send an owl to Baron. Even if it meant absolutely nothing to him, she needed to put down into words her feelings and support.

So that night Ginny found herself in the study on the second floor that was filled with books and old parchment, the Black family tree on the wall. The brown leather chair squeaked as she sat. She wrote her letter with Herpo curled up in her lap, ignoring any sense of decorum in favor of expressing her desire to be there for Baron and Gretchen if ever they needed anything.

It was only a few minutes later when the door opened, and Charlie walked in.

"The sister I know doesn't hide in a study," Charlie said.

"I'm not hiding," she said, signing the letter.

"You look like you are."

Her eyes sliced over to his green ones, cold and controlled. "My friend just lost his parents. I'm writing him a note."

"And our parents are downstairs fretting over you."

"They don't need to," she said, tying a neat bow around the parchment. "I was always going to be a part of this."

"This?" he asked, looking around. "What? This room? This house?"

"This war."

"You going to win it alone?" he asked, turning her seat with a foot. "We're all going to fight, Ginny. Together. Don't think you're too special to fight with us."

"Mum won't want me to," she said, clutching the sharp, pretty quill she had used.

"When has that ever stopped you?" Charlie asked seriously.

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Hours later, Ginny lay in bed thinking about the day that had started out so boisterously. The Ramseys had been attacked. The ramifications of that still hadn't hit her, and she lay awake in the newly clean House of Black wondering if Tom was happy with the current events. She couldn't imagine he was. For all that Voldemort was evil, he was also purposeful and determined to assert the supremacy of the Purebloods. Killing the Ramseys was a stupid, illogical thing to do.

In the middle of these thoughts, a knock on her door in the middle of the night surprised Ginny, but the head that popped in a moment later surprised her more.

“What are you doing, Harry?” she asked, spinning to face him.

He opened the door all the way, revealing Ron behind him. “We’re going flying.”

Her heart ached. “Flying?”

“That’s what he said, isn’t it?” Ron asked irritably, bothering Ginny.

Before she could snap back at him, Harry interrupted, “After Cedric— Well, if there was one thing I wanted to do the holiday after fourth year, it was fly.”

Instead, in the midst of his confusion and pain, Harry had been stuck at his awful relatives. Alone.

“So you could do it as a favor for me. Think of it as my Christmas present,” Harry said, a small smile on his mouth. Someday, she might have to tell him how difficult it was for her to wrench her eyes from his green ones, to see him looking so sparkling and not want to be closer to him.

She nodded, pulling on her jumper over her flannel pajamas as she stood. “Where are we going?”

“Home,” he said, and the three of them quietly left Grimmauld Place through the Floo, falling into Spinner’s End with unusual grace, checking their brooms for damage in the transit. And they spent the quiet night flying on the grounds of a home that had been forgotten for nearly twenty years, in a heated Quidditch pitch that overlooked the ocean’s silver waves as they danced under the moon.

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Author's Note: I don't know if this comes across in this chapter, but I am from a family of six. Four of them are brothers, and this chapter is dedicated to them because they inspired all of the Weasley conversations with their own comments. Hope you enjoyed the chapter. – Miranda

## CHAPTER 10

### The Aftermath

On Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ , parents and students alike looked harried as they said goodbye, not wanting to linger too long at the station. During the train ride, rumors flew. The Prophet had done a full-page cover story about the attack, spending a particularly long time talking about the murder of the Head Boy's parents. The article, however, said nothing about the current state of Baron and Gretchen Ramsey, who had their proprietor speak in their stead.

"That seems a little cold," Colin said at dinner their first night back.

"If I were them, I wouldn't feel like talking to anyone either," Holden said.

"The Head Girl told us Baron and Gretchen won't be back for a while," Kerney said.

"But they are coming back?" Ginny asked, a dull ache in her gut.

Kerney nodded, and the conversation plowed on. Ginny didn't want to mention the details her dad had admitted: that Baron and Gretchen had been home when it happened, that Gretchen had stood in the living room until the last of the Aurors had left.

Professor Dumbledore made a pretty speech before dinner that Ginny hadn't heard at all, twirling pasta absently around her fork as she watched the students in Hufflepuff cry quietly. Gryffindors and Slytherins talked about fighting, but it was the Badgers who had lost two of their own already to the escalating violence. Cedric Diggory and Wendy Tibbals now stood as a testament to the pain of innocent death.

"What's the hell is wrong with his hand?" Artemis asked quietly, clearly scared.

“What?” Ginny asked, leaning back to see the headmaster better. It was immediately apparent what everyone was whispering about: Dumbledore’s right hand looked charred and dead.

“What could cause that?” Artemis asked.

“Could he have been clipped by the Killing Curse?” Colin asked.

Ginny shook her head even as Andy answered, “No. One touch of the Avada and you’re completely dead.”

“Then what the hell—”

“Something evil,” Kerney said.

It was a somber meal, and people left quickly.

Andy, her oldest and closest friend, dipped his head to catch her eye as most students left. “You alright, Ginny?”

She jerked out of her thoughts, nodding absently. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

He paused, looking around at the thinning dinner crowd.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay,” she repeated, glad once more that Andy was so willing to accept her without challenge.

“I’m going to go up to the tower now,” he said, nodding at the doorway.

Ginny glanced down the nearly-empty table. “I’ll be up in a minute. I have something I want to turn in first.”

“Turn in?”

Ginny nodded. “Detention essay.”

Even though he clearly didn't understand the urgency, Andy said, "Alright. See you up there."

Ginny stood soon after he left to go up to the tower, reflexively reaching for her school bag, only to realize it wasn't with her. Thinking that she needed to get her head out of the clouds, she left the Great Hall heading for Professor Wrightman's office, where she leave drop the essay in the drop box. She was passing by a suit of armor when she noticed a tiny girl sitting on a stone bench in the shadows of an alcove, crying into her hands.

Glancing around to see if anyone else was around, Ginny took a step closer. "Hello? Are you alright?"

The girl took her hands away from her eyes as she lifted her head and stood. "Oh. I just— I thought I was— I'm fine."

An echo of Ginny's earlier empty words. "You sure?"

Wiping her eyes on the end of her Hufflepuff scarf, the girl nodded. "I was just—"

The silence stretched on.

"Wendy Tibbals was my friend," the girl whispered, crying again in earnest as she sank back down onto her seat. Wendy had been one of the students attacked over the break.

"I'm sorry," Ginny said, sitting beside her.

"Everyone keeps saying that," the girl said in her shaking voice, "but it doesn't make anything better."

How many times had her family said they were sorry to Ginny after her first year? How many times had her mother apologized as if doing so could make the ordeal with Tom different?

"It's what people say when they know you're hurting, and wish they had the power to make it stop," Ginny said.

The girl clasped her hands together tightly. “My aunt didn’t want me to come back here. She wanted me to go to Beauxbaton, where my mum went. We had a huge row about it after Wendy’s funeral, and I told her she was being stupid. Because I thought that if I came back here...”

It would be okay. Like it hadn’t really happened. Like she could start over again. Ginny knew about these futile wishes.

“I’m sorry,” the girl cried, wiping her tears away.

“Don’t be sorry that you’re sad,” Ginny said. “That’s okay.”

“You’re never sad,” the girl said. “You were taken into a Chamber by the heir of Slytherin, and everyone says you weren’t even scared.”

The mythos about the Chamber had only grown as years went on.

“I was terrified,” Ginny admitted, making the girl look up in surprise. “And upset.”

“But you— You fought at the Ministry last year with Harry Potter.”

That particular secret had lasted about ten minutes. “I fought because I was scared. I didn’t want anything to happen to my friends. So I listened in class, learned what I could, and did my best to keep them safe.”

The brown-haired girl’s arms remained wrapped around her chest. “Wendy was a Pureblood, like the Ramseys.”

“All the Death Eaters and Voldemort really care about is power,” Ginny said, watching the girl flinch at the name. “And they’ll kill anyone in their way.”

“I knew that they—”

“Sarah?” a female voice asked from the corridor, causing both Ginny and the little girl to stand and move into the light. It was a seventh

year Hufflepuff Ginny recognized as Alexandra Creggie, the Head Girl with whom she had never spoken. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"It's okay," Sarah said, trying valiantly to look less upset in front of the older student.

"I noticed that you weren't back in the common room yet," Alexandra said, her badge gleaming in the light. Sarah's eyes fell to the ground.

"My fault," Ginny said, stepping in. "We were talking, and I didn't realize how late it was."

Alexandra looked kindly at her, then Sarah, who was staring at the floor. "We're having a ceremony for Wendy."

Sarah, who couldn't have been more than a third year, looked up with tears in her eyes again. "Oh."

The Head Girl nodded at the girl, and said, "We can't start without you"

"I miss her," Sarah admitted, crying again, and Ginny felt an ache inside her chest as Alexandra reached out and embraced Sarah.

Ginny wished she could reach out and help, but didn't know how. She wondered if Alexandra knew the little third year well, or if this was simply how all Hufflepuffs were, willing to hold each other when they fell apart.

When her crying subsided, Sarah wiped her eyes again. "Sorry."

"You never have to apologize for missing your friend," Alexandra assured her.

"I'm ready to go back."

"Alright. I think your friends would like that," Alexandra said, standing and putting a hand on the girl's shoulder before turning to Ginny. "You're welcome to join us."

"That's alright," she said, but addressed Sarah. "I'm always here to talk to if you need it."

"Thanks," she said, smiling a small, watery smile.

And the three split ways down the winding stone corridors of Hogwarts castle, quiet and still as if the castle itself were honoring its fallen students.

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Having forgotten about her essay in the wake of her conversation with Sarah from Hufflepuff, Ginny realized that she would have to turn in the essay the next day after class. Of course, Othello and Colin were understandably confused when she sat next to Andy in the Defense class.

"I thought you quit this class," Colin said.

"No," Ginny replied, pulling out her book, parchment, and quill.

"But you didn't come at all the whole month of December," Colin pressed.

If Andy and Kerney were similarly confused, they didn't say so as they prepared for class beside her. Professor Wrightman didn't even blink when she saw Ginny in the third row beside her friends.

"Professor?" Artemis called out in the brief lull before the class started.

"Yes, Miss Lively?" Professor Wrightman replied.

"I was wondering," the girl said, hesitant but resolved, "if you were considering changing some of the lessons because of the attacks."

Normally, to question a professor's curriculum was bold. To question a professor like Wrightman was insane. But normal had ended over the break, and everyone knew it.

“Your lessons will prepare us for the O.W.L.s,” Kerney added, surprising Ginny. “But what about during the holiday after that? The Underage Use of Magic law lets us defend ourselves, but we need to know how to do that.”

The Muggle-born girl had clearly thought this through, and it was strange to Ginny that they had never discussed the issue. Ginny took it for granted, she supposed, that magic was in her home.

Wrightman nodded. “The second half of your Double Defense class on Wednesdays will be devoted to offensive spells and warding of homes.”

And class went on as scheduled, working in small groups to construct methods for best defending against invisible assailants. It was a challenging, engaging lesson that required a lot of discussion and argument, which was never resolved by Wrightman. She only critiqued the final guidelines that students proposed at the end of class.

“Your next lesson, we will see how your theoretical plans work in a practical situation. Prepare accordingly,” the professor said before dismissing the class for the day, most of the students still talking about their plans and what the professor could have meant by the last bit.

The lesson made Ginny wonder why she had felt too good to be in this class.

“Miss Weasley,” Professor Wrightman said when the younger girl approached her desk. The two were in the room alone. “Do you have my essay?”

“Yes, professor,” Ginny said, pulling the roll of parchment from her bag.

Wrightman wrapped her long fingers around it. “Is your return to my classroom temporary?”

“No,” Ginny said.



“Good.” It was a cue to leave the room, but Ginny had a few more things to say before she made her way over to Ancient Runes.

“I’m sorry for invading your memories. It wasn’t intentional.”

Wrightman nodded and said, “I accept your apology.”

Ginny hesitated, eyes darting over to the low window that overlooked the grounds before focusing on her professor. “But that doesn’t mean I can forget what I saw.”

In the cool, dark room where she taught Defense, Professor Wrightman scrutinized Ginny Weasley. “Sirius Black and I had an arranged marriage that was never fulfilled. His association isn’t one many people appreciate.”

“But I do,” Ginny said because she remembered something in the conversation with Remus, something in way his eyes when he had talked about Wrightman.

“I don’t care,” Wrightman said, her cold blue eyes trained on Ginny, and under her perfect face and perfect hair, Ginny thought she might have seen a glimmer of grief, the same kind all of that generation shared, of dead friends and classmates and the memories of how quickly the world breaks. Wrightman had been a Slytherin—she exuded it from her very pores—and she must have seen friends join the Death Eaters, seen them fall to greed and hatred. Part of Ginny hated this woman for turning from Sirius in his hour of need, hated Wrightman for thinking Remus was weak, hated that she had seemingly run from the war that other, better people had fought and died in.

But a large part of Ginny—one that Tom Riddle and Harry Potter had molded—also pitied the woman for being yet another witness to a war that had hurt so many.

Ginny left without another word exchanged, arriving in Ancient Runes just before the Professor, unable to stop thinking about her exchange

with Professor Wrightman. There was still so much she didn't know about that woman.

"Hello Ginny," Luna said once the lesson was underway.

"Hey Luna," Ginny said, her mood lightening in the presence of her friend. "How was your holiday in America?"

"Good. We found the dinosaurs," Luna said, carving three straight lines in the stone tablet they had been given. "But they're all dead."

"That's too bad," Ginny said, sketching the rune they were supposed to study.

"The Muggles make copies of their bones and hang them from the ceiling on the ends of string, trying to recreate their shape," Luna said.

Ginny glanced at her friend. "Why?"

"For children to enjoy, we think. The bones are very popular." Luna smiled. "People pay to see them. Dad and I did too, to have the full experience."

"Of course you did."

"We agreed that hanging bones from string is better than burying them," Luna said happily. "Dad wanted me to stay in America with him studying them, but I said I needed to go back to school. He worries."

"About the attacks?"

Luna nodded. "I'm really sad for Baron and Gretchen. They'll see the Thestrals now."

"I guess they will." Luna's way of looking at the world always surprised Ginny. "I keep thinking about the Hufflepuff girl, Wendy Tibbals, and her family."

"I think about them, too. Her older brother's wife cried a lot at the funeral," Luna said.

"You went to her funeral?" Ginny asked, and Luna nodded. "Did you know her?"

"No. Dad and I go to a lot of funerals because it meant so much that people came to my mum's," Luna said. For all that people called her a space cadet, Luna was a very caring person.

Ginny wrapped her arm through Luna's and rested her head on her shoulder. "I wish I had gone to your mother's."

"Come to mine. It would be nice to have friends there," Luna said, her light words stabbing Ginny in the stomach. She really didn't want to think about losing this friend of hers.

"I'd prefer for that not to happen for a long time."

Luna shrugged. "Preference rarely influences fate."

--

As children tend to, they managed to push past the awful events, and the atmosphere at Hogwarts slowly returned to normal, with only slight differences. As usual, the Hufflepuffs walked together, but now it wasn't unusual to see older and younger students gathered together at their table, conversing in low, sympathetic tones.

But classes went on, potions were made, Divination homework made up, and essays turned in. Theo Nott popped back into her life before the end of the first week of term, and she found herself unexpectedly pleased to see him.

"Are you stalking me now?" Ginny asked, adjusting her Ancient Runes books in her hands as she paused in the corridor.

"I think we both know who among us would be the more likely to stalk the other," he said with a self-assured smile. He challenged her, lit a spark, and it made her come alive. She loved it.

"I am a very good stalker."

They were alone in the corridor as he asked, "Have you figured out what potion I'm trying to make?"

"I haven't really thought about you since we last talked," Ginny said, lying through her teeth.

"That's a shame. I'm a terribly interesting person," he said

She nodded and said jokingly, "Interesting, conceited, arrogant."

"Confident," he corrected.

"Devon suggested that you might be good enough to date me," she said.

"She mentioned that you could be worth my time," he said, not phased in the least by her comment, as much as admitting to what Ginny had already suspected: that the boys on her list of acceptable mates hadn't just started talking to Ginny randomly. Devon must have said something to them.

"Probably because we banter so damn well together," she said.

He raised an eyebrow. "Or maybe because she knew you needed someone to teach you exactly how to make a Relaxant Elixir."

"Please. My elixirs are perfect," she said, waving a hand only to have to drop it quickly to catch the shifting rolls of parchment in her arms. "If you're going to be useful to me, find another avenue."

His eyes danced as he leaned closer. "I could think of a few ways I could be useful to you, if properly motivated."

"And only if you're checked for diseases first," Ginny said, smiling up at him, and he finally laughed.

“Go to class, Ginny. You have too much time to think up insults,” he said, and they parted ways with both of them smiling.

Ancient Runes remained her most difficult class, taking up most of her study time. Ironically, it was also the one in which she did her most consistently excellent work, which only proved to her that she just needed to be challenged in order to care. Unfortunately, Ancient Runes took place in the same day as Double Potions, so no matter how good Ginny felt about her marks in the former, the latter always managed to seep away her good mood.

“You did well on the exam,” Devon said as they began working on their potion for the day.

“Thanks. You too.” The exam felt like it had been months ago rather than just weeks, but Snape always insisted on posting the results on a piece of parchment nailed to the outside of his office door, so it was all anyone could talk about that day.

After checking her calculations, Ginny added the cut grass and said, “I ran into Theo in the corridor.”

Devon nodded, shifting sand into the potion that was supposed to become a Regenerative Plaster.

Ginny decided to change subjects. “Have you heard anything from Baron or Gretchen?”

“They’re coming back,” Devon said.

“I know,” Ginny said, “but—”

Since Christmas, the Slytherins had lacked their usual air of tight-knit aloofness. The Ramseys had been a prominent, powerful, neutral Slytherin family. Their deaths had rocked the foundation of security on which all other Purebloods rested.

“The Hufflepuffs had a memorial service in their common room for the student they lost,” Ginny said.

Devon rolled her eyes. "Sentimental fools."

Ginny's eyes snapped to Devon. "I thought it was nice."

"One of their friends was murdered, and you think sitting around lighting candles for her will make that any better?" Devon asked.

"It was a nice thought," Ginny said, thinking of the Head Girl who had so effortlessly humbled herself to embrace a younger student she hadn't known well. "They take care of each other."

"They should have spent that time working on Defense spells with Professor Wrightman," Devon said.

"That's cold."

"It's true."

"You didn't go to the Ramsey memorial?" Ginny asked. It had been held a week after the murders, and Ginny had asked her mum to send flowers, but from the pictures in the paper, she was sure no one noticed her little bouquet.

"Of course I did, and I paid my respects, but that's different than a bunch of students standing around crying on one another."

"How?"

"Grief is personal. Funerals are about appearances," Devon said, making Ginny think of Luna and her father going to funerals to comfort the grieving.

Bothered, Ginny couldn't help but say, "I think you have some very skewed ideas about respect and friendship and support."

"If someone I knew died," Devon said, looking up from the potion, "would you really want me to cry on your shoulder?"

"Yes," Ginny said. "If you were sad, I would want to be there to do what I could, whenever you needed me."

Devon looked baffled by this response. "Even if you didn't know the person?"

"Especially then," Ginny said. "Because you would need support, and I could give you that."

"You don't even know me that well," Devon said, surprising Ginny.

"That's not the point. You're my friend," Ginny said. "That means I'm there for you when you hurt, not that I go through the traditional ceremonies and then ignore what happened to you afterward."

Devon ignored that, going back to the potion and eventually changing the subject. Ginny hoped she had proven her point as she thought about little Sarah sitting on the cold, stone bench in the empty corridor. She doubted that the Slytherins would have sent someone to look for her. But she also doubted that a third year Slytherin would have cried in such a public space.

--

A week and a half into the term, Ginny walked into the Great Hall for breakfast a bit after all of her friends, having just sent off a letter to Bill. She was about halfway to her usual spot in the middle of the Gryffindor table when she thought that someone at the Ravenclaw table had been pointing at her, but by the time she did a double take, the girl's outstretched arm had been replaced by a whispering huddle of students, darting their eyes between her and each other. What the hell? She shook it off and kept on her way. Not being able to help glancing back at her alleged observers, she saw them staring more openly now. She checked over her shoulder, but there was no one else in the entranceway. They were definitely looking at her.

Ginny frowned. Being pointed at and whispered about was not something she was used to, but she held her head high and sat in the empty seat beside Colin.

"Do I have an embarrassing stain anywhere on my uniform?" Ginny asked jokingly.

“What? What? What?” Colin asked, eyes darting around anywhere but at her.

“Did you eat another Weasley Wizard Weezes tester?” Ginny asked with a smile, momentarily forgetting her entrance.

“He’s embarrassed,” Kerney said shortly as she joined them at the table, having obviously just ended a conversation with someone else.

“Why?” Ginny asked, noticing over the table that people in both Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were still glancing at her. “Am I secretly not wearing any clothes? I’ve had dreams like that.”

“So have some boys, apparently,” muttered Lavender Brown from a little bit down the table.

“Excuse me?” Ginny asked, mouth hanging open.

“Nothing,” Parvati said. “She’s jealous.”

“Of what?” Ginny asked.

“You haven’t heard?” Parvati asked, eyes lighting up.

“Heard what?” By now, Ginny noticed that most of the older boys she counted as friends were all trying extremely hard not to make eye contact with her, and most were swarming around Duncan Moran, who was shaking his head and waving them off.

Parvati leaned closer. “There’s a survey.”

“She’s taking too long to explain this,” Ginny said, turning to Kerney. “Explain it faster.”

“Andy wants to,” Kerney said in a steely voice that seemed to indicate exactly how little Andy actually wanted that honor.

Her blue-eyed friend opened his mouth to answer, but hesitated.



"It's complicated," Othello piped in.

"Don't even get me started on the fact that you are a prefect with responsibilities to all the students in this school, including girls," Kerney snapped.

He looked quelled. "Was I supposed to stop seventh years?"

"Yes." Kerney's tone was final, and Othello was wise enough to let it go.

"This is all just building anticipation," Ginny said, looking at Andy. "Tell me."

"The seventh and sixth year boys—"

"And most of the fifth years," interjected Nadine.

"Yes," Andy said, glancing irritably at her. "All got together before Christmas, and rated the girls at Hogwarts according to certain categories."

"Categories," Ginny repeated, quelling the sense of panic that had arisen.

"Yes."

"What kind of categories?"

Kerney's hand slapped a piece of parchment in front of Ginny. "These categories."

Scooping up the parchment, Ginny quickly scanned the content, scrawled out in non-descript cursive.

Nicest: Katie Bell

Best Sense of Humor: Melissa Jordan

Hottest: Cho Chang

Best Quidditch Player: Ginny Weasley

Most Likely to be Head Girl: Fifth year: Kerney Scott; Sixth year: Hermione Granger

Most Dangerous with a Hex: Gretchen Ramsey

Best to Take Home to Parents: Katie Bell

Worst to Take Home to Parents: Millicent Bulstrode

Best Kisser: Hannah Abbot

Worst Kisser: Emily Smith

Best Legs: Naomi Ryan

Best Boobs: Tie: Daphne Greengrass, Marcia McLean

Best Arse: Parvati Patil

Best Shag: Tie: Danielle Wade, Olivia Flint

Easiest Shag: Marietta Edgecombe

Most Dateable: Katie Bell

Most Shagable: Ginny Weasley

Despite the awful feeling in her gut, Ginny was rather proud to have won Best Quidditch Player. That pride, however, was overwhelmed by horror and embarrassment as she saw that she had landed Most Shagable.

“The lists have been charmed to be hidden from professors,” Kerney said angrily, but no matter how righteously indignant Kerney became, Ginny knew that no one would report this list to the professors. There were widely accepted informal boarding school rules about this sort of

thing that even prefects respected: students dealt with problems like this alone.

Knowing that many people must be watching to see her reaction, Ginny pushed down her emotions to ask Andy, “So, the seventh, sixth, and fifth year boys—”

“Yes.”

“—all gathered together, from every house—”

“It would appear so, yes.”

“—and in their collective wisdom, decided that they all want to shag me like a minx?”

He paused, but to his credit, Andy never broke eye contact. “I’m not sure I’d put it like that exactly. But, yes, basically.”

“Huh,” Ginny said.

“They didn’t think we’d find out,” Kerney said. “They thought they could make two dozen identical sheets like this and that no girl would find out.”

“That’s dumb,” Ginny said, looking back over the list. Marietta Edgecomb being labeled an easy shag brightened her mood perversely.

“Are you alright?” Nadine asked her quietly.

“No,” Ginny said, compartmentalizing her embarrassment and feeling of discomfort. “I’m confused.”

“It’s pretty straight-forward,” Holden muttered, earning a slap on the back of the head from Kerney, and a small smile from Ginny.

Ginny tossed her list down on the table. “But how could I be Most Shaggable without also being the hottest? Are these blokes just lusting after my wildly attractive personality?”

The tension in the group eased as Kerney rolled her eyes at Ginny's attempt at humor, giving the redhead a look to indicate that she knew Ginny didn't think this was okay.

"Was this what Dean and Seamus pulled you out of the library to do before Christmas?" Ginny asked Andy, who nodded, clearly embarrassed and avoiding Nadine's eye as she ate her cereal with an unusual amount of focus that morning.

The professors at the staff table clearly knew that something was up: Snape's eyes narrowed as they scanned the room, and McGonagall's lips were pursed. But Ginny resolved to wait through breakfast as though nothing had happened. It was a little difficult when Cho Chang came in; the room went silent before bursting into a crescendo of talking.

Ginny might have gone over to tell her what was going on, but three friends from her table hurried over and ushered her out of the Great Hall.

"I don't think she's that hot," Ginny noted.

"She's not," Nadine agreed, and they went back to eating.

--

Their first class being Potions was almost a relief that morning as Snape walked in and ordered, "Whatever is plaguing you insolent students will not be discussed in this room."

But his intimidating presence didn't permeate the corridors, and so to pass the time, Ginny harassed her friends as they walked back to the common room after dinner.

"Oy, McGrath," Ginny said as she consulted The List. "Olivia Flint or Danielle Wade." While Andy cringed, Nadine turned sharply to watch his reaction to the question. Ginny took note of this.

"Too long!" she accused.

“Challenge!” he called.

“You’re just trying to get out of answering because you took so long,” Ginny said. “You know the rules, you have to reply spontaneously for the most honest answer. Now it’s time for punishment.”

“I’m allowed to challenge. You added that clause,” he reminded her.

Ginny glanced at Kerney, who nodded.

“On what grounds?” she asked. Challenges, if approved let a person not answer. If denied, it meant automatic punishment.

“I challenge because instead of thinking of my answer, I was preoccupied by the thought that if I said ‘Olivia’ you would hex me,” he responded rationally. Ginny paused to consider this. “Even if I would have said Danielle, you using Olivia automatically exempted me from the time rule.”

“I bet if you checked his survey, it’d give you your answer,” a new voice interjected. Eight fifth-years swiveled in unison to see Michael Corner standing with three friends at the end of the corridor. “Wouldn’t it, McGrath?”

“Oh, go away, Michael,” Ginny said, waving him off.

Her ex-boyfriend leered at her. “The other blokes should have listened to me when I told them you weren’t anything special.”

Ginny didn’t remember him being this cruel, but their breakup had been pretty ugly.

“They seemed to disagree with you,” she said, smiling tightly.

“Corner, what are you even doing here?” Andy asked, stepping forward to stand beside Ginny.

“I was just going to owlry,” he said. “Do you want me to give you two some alone time?”

"Alone time?" Ginny repeated. "There are two other people here. Are you blind?"

"No," he said, stepping toward her. "I see what's right in front of me. A common slag."

"Back away from her," commanded a voice from behind Ginny that she instantly recognized.

"This has nothing to do with you, Potter," Michael said. "You don't know what she's really like."

"Leave," Harry said, his back tense. Michael glanced at him, taking a step backward, and then his eyes flickered behind Harry. Ginny followed his gaze and saw her brother and Hermione standing there, too, both with wands in hand. Michael had been in the D.A. He knew not to mess with them.

"You know she left me, and immediately rebounded with Dean Thomas, right? She goes through blokes like socks," Michael said, shaking his head at her and walking away.

"Well, that could have gone better," Ginny said.

"Does he always treat you like that?" Harry asked.

Ginny shook her head. "We normally ignore each other."

"You normally ignore him," Kerney corrected, making Ginny glance at her. Michael ignored her, didn't he? Ginny couldn't really say that she noticed. She was busy with other things.

"I can't believe you dated that loser," Ron grumbled.

"He used to be nice. And fun," Ginny said. "And smart. Well, he still is smart, but I think he's upset to realize he lost the best Quidditch player in school."

“He only just realized that?” Ron asked without a trace of embarrassment. “I would have thought last year’s Quidditch match against Ravenclaw could have proven that.”

Harry smiled and nodded, and it became clear that neither he nor Ron nor even Hermione knew about the survey that had taken over the school’s gossip mills. It was a painful reminder of how isolated the three of them were becoming. Ginny knew that they hadn’t been at breakfast, but Hermione usually knew what was going on in the school regardless of her other projects.

Kerney, Andy, and Nadine seemed to realize their ignorance as well as they stopped talking about it while the group of seven went back to the common room, where Othello and Colin raced to join them while the Trio broke apart to adjourn on their usual couch.

Without even saying hello, Colin said to Andy, “Melissa Jordan or Cho Chang.”

“Melissa Jordan,” Andy answered instantly.

“Ooh. Personality over physicality. Unexpected,” Colin said, glancing at the parchment. “Naomi Ryan or Ginny Weasley.”

“Challenge,” Andy said quickly while Nadine tensed.

“Why?” Colin the Oblivious asked.

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Granted.”

But Nadine looked sick to her stomach and upset, as if going through an intense personal debate. It was such a given in Ginny’s mind that Andy was in love with her that she had never once considered that Nadine might not know.

Suddenly inspired, Ginny said, “Alright McGrath, do-over from earlier.”

Andy smirked, which was his first mistake. After almost five years of friendship, he should have been suspicious at the look in Ginny's eyes. But alas, boys were often fools.

"Nadine Ryan or Ginny Weasley," she said.

Andy's face blanched and he looked down as he mumbled his answer, knowing his challenge would not be granted. Not noticing the utterly panicked look on Nadine's face, Ginny stepped forward with exaggerated thoughtfulness, hand to her ear.

"What was that, Andy? I couldn't quite hear you," she said a little more loudly than she needed to. He looked up quickly and with such intensity, that Ginny's good humor was momentarily arrested.

"Nadine Ryan," he replied, slowly and evenly, never breaking his eye contact with Ginny. He sent an absolutely smoldering glance to an equally surprised Nadine, and made his way up to the boys' dormitory. Ginny was suddenly faint with jealousy—she wished a boy would look at her like that. Kerney looked intrigued, and Nadine looked like a deer in headlights.

But Andy had stopped on the stairs and turned around.

"Right then. Ginny!" he yelled from the landing. All the Gryffindors in the common room glanced over at him.

"Yeah?" she answered, stepping toward the stairs.

"Andy McGrath or Harry Potter?" he yelled, satisfied smirk on his features, arms crossed across his chest. Ginny froze.

In a surprised voice, she answered reflexively, "Harry Potter."

Andy turned and left Ginny standing there horrified.

She hadn't thought about the embarrassment it could cause him when she had propositioned him with Nadine's name, she had been thinking about how to make Nadine feel better. Frick.



Ginny would have gone immediately to talk to Andy, but Nadine beat her to the punch.

"I think," Nadine said haltingly, looking around at them. "I think I need to talk to him."

--

Deciding not to be too creepy, Ginny waited on the floor at the end of the hallway that led from the stairs to the fifth year boys' dormitory. She was just out of sight of the common room, but at the opposite end of the corridor from the door of the room in which Nadine and Andy had barricaded themselves. She didn't want them to think she was trying to listen in.

It had been a while since she had acted so ridiculously about the question game, and she was starting to rethink her decision to sit in vigil outside of Andy's room. But she wanted to be the next person he saw. She needed to apologize.

Her attention was distracted as she heard footsteps coming up the boys' stairs. Every once in a while she would hear someone coming up, but usually they just kept on going up to whatever floor they lived on. Some didn't even notice she was sitting there.

But this one did.

"Ginny?" Harry asked, as he stopped his progress up the stairs and came around the corner to see her.

"Oh, hey Harry," she replied sleepily. It was swiftly approaching bedtime, and she hadn't even started her work yet. She rubbed her eyes, not unlike a small child. Harry smiled.

"What are you doing?" he asked, with genuine curiosity.

Ginny sighed and laid down on the floor. "Waiting to apologize to my best friend for humiliating him in front of the girl he's madly in love with."

“What was that game you were playing, anyway?” he asked.

“The question game,” she answered simply, eyes still shut.

“And how does one play the question game?”

“Well, say you and I were playing,” she began, finally opening her eyes to look at him as she sat up. He was standing directly above her head, looking down at her from six feet up, but moved to sit down next to her. Her face shifted with him as he moved. “I would say out two girls’ names, and you have to pick the one that you find most attractive, or the one you’d prefer to snog, or the one you find less revolting. It’s a wonderful game. And you have to answer immediately, so the other people playing know you’re not lying. If you don’t answer right away, you’re punished, which means you have to do whatever dare the questioner gives you.”

“So, what happened earlier,” Harry said, “was that you asked Andrew to pick between you and Nadine Ryan.”

“Yeah.” She felt badly about it. “It would be like Hermione making you pick between her and Cho Chang last year.”

“In front of Cho,” Harry said. “Cruel.”

“I know!” she said, throwing up her hands. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Are your dares really awful?”

“If he hadn’t answered, I would have dared him to kiss her.”

Harry’s eyebrows went up. “Really?”

“I’m mean.

“So you knew how he’d answer.”

“Everyone knows how he’d answer. Except her,” Ginny grumbled. “And the only reason I did it in the first place was because stupid Colin thought it would be funny to pick girls from the survey and

asked Andy to choose between me and Nadine's older sister."

Harry stilled. "The survey."

"Oh, that's right. You didn't know about that, did you?" Ginny asked, really not wanting to explain.

Harry pulled piece of parchment from his pocket. "Seamus just told me."

"So my humiliation is complete," Ginny said.

"I didn't participate in this," Harry said, holding up the folded survey.

A flash of pride and disappointment went through her simultaneously. "So you don't think I'm the best Quidditch player around?"

"That's not—" He put together the words. "I'd never fill something like this out."

"Of course not. Merlin forbid you be a normal teenager," Ginny said, resting her head against the wall.

He looked perplexed. "What? You think I should have—"

"No," she said, cutting him off. "I'm sorry. This has just been a long day, and now I'll have to deal with Ron. I'm not looking forward to that at all."

Harry smiled. "He's too embarrassed to bring it up."

"Really?" she asked hopefully.

Harry nodded. "He's horrified. Literally shook his finger at Dean and Seamus for filling out the survey."

"He didn't participate either?" That was rather more surprising.

"We've been busy," Harry said.

"You must be planning something really big for even Hermione to have been oblivious," Ginny said, watching him closely.

Harry hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. We are."

Ginny waited for him to go on, but when he didn't, she said, "Too bad."

"Too bad?"

"Yeah. I would have liked for you to be the one to notice the list since you're the most likely to empathize."

"I don't really think I could empathize with this situation," Harry said.

"Of course you could," Ginny said with a smile. "You're Witch Weekly's Most Eligible Bachelor."

He smiled ruefully. "Right."

"Maybe I should be proud to be seen as the most shagable girl at Hogwarts," Ginny said. "At least it makes me different than my brothers."

Harry actually laughed after blushing. "We hope."

She laughed with him. "Charlie was widely sought after at school."

They sat in content silent, resting against the wall and listening to the quiet in the dark, empty corridor.

"I'm glad you picked me over Andy," Harry said out of nowhere.

Ginny's heart skipped a beat, horrified that Harry had heard that part, let alone brought it up after the fact.

"Of course I did," she said, recovering as quickly as she could. "Andy's like a seventh brother to me."

“Good,” Harry said.

Feeling his breath deliciously on her ear, Ginny turned to find him rather close to her. “Good?”

“It’s good that you don’t think of me as a brother,” Harry said quietly, his face so close, and his eyes so intense. “Because I don’t think of you as a sister.”

He went quiet again, and Ginny could feel him in front of her, so close it was almost tangible, and she was sure something was going to happen, but a new voice broke through their quiet conversation.

“What’s this?” Andy asked, with not a little sarcasm. Hearing his voice, Ginny wrenched herself away from Harry and scrambled to her feet.

“I am so sorry,” she said quickly. He put his hands up as if to calm and slow her down.

Nadine shot her a thankful smile from behind Andy, before venturing to speak herself. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Andy. I’m going to bed.”

Andy smiled and nodded in pleasant acquiescence. “Night Nadine.”

“Night Harry. Goodnight, Ginny,” Nadine said. Harry and Ginny responded in kind.

“I think I’ll go to bed, too,” Harry said, touching Ginny’s hand lightly and sending pleasant thrills up her arm. Much as she wanted to apologize to Andy, she desperately wished he had taken just two more minutes to talk to Nadine.

“Night, mate,” Andy offered. Harry smiled and nodded.

“Night Andy, Ginny.” He looked at her for an extended moment, and then turned to walk up the stairs to the room he shared with the rest of the sixth year boys. Ginny watched him leave and was still watching long after he was out of sight.

“You look like a lovesick puppy.”

"I've never denied that," Ginny said sadly, turning back to her friend with two fingers held sadly close together. "And I truly am very sorry that I hurt you, Andy."

"I'm sorry I retaliated," he said.

"I deserved it," she said.

He shook his head. "You didn't."

"Well, you didn't deserve me taking advantage of you like that," Ginny said, aching.

Andy did the most brilliant thing he could have done at that moment, and hugged his close friend of nearly five years.

"I forgive you, Ginny," he replied.

"Thanks," Ginny muttered into his shoulder as she returned his affectionate embrace. She didn't know what she would do without him.

--

The next day was Saturday, and as usual, very few people showed up early to breakfast. Ginny was rather grumpy that she was one of them, but had resigned herself to the fact that once she had a schedule, she rose early out of habit. One of the benefits, of course, was that Harry Potter usually awoke as early as she.

"We need to learn to sleep in," she said, sitting beside him at the large wood table.

"I'm considering hypnotizing myself."

"Hypnotizing?" she asked, picking up a banana.

"Muggle thing, I guess," Harry said, yawning.

An unexpected hand on her shoulder made Ginny twist around to see Theodore Nott standing behind her.

She automatically smirked in his presence. "Run out of eggs at the Slytherin table?"

"You want to make a potion with me after dinner?" he asked.

"I've heard better pick-up lines from second years."

"Second years hit on you?" he asked, amused.

She couldn't help but smile. There was something magnetic about Theo Nott. "I'm the most shaggable girl in school, didn't you hear?"

"Huh," he said shortly. "Well, you're not really my type."

"I'm everyone's type," she said waving him off.

"About the potion."

She nodded. "Snape's classroom?"

"Eight o'clock."

He glided back across the room to sit beside Devon.

"How do you know Theodore Nott?" Harry asked, eying the Slytherin curiously.

"He's a friend of Devon's," Ginny said. "Speaking of which, you still want to continue the Potions studying, right?"

Harry nodded. "Tuesdays and Thursdays still work best."

"Alright," she said, pleasantly eating her breakfast. The sky in the Great Hall was piercing blue, and Ginny just knew that it would be freezing outside. The wind was the worst, but at least she didn't have Herbology class or Quidditch practice to force her outside.

“How did things go with Andy?” Harry wanted to know.

“He forgave me,” she said, frowning at her own bad behavior in that exchange. “He’s a better person than me. I would have made him grovel.”

“That’s because you’re mean,” Harry teased, “as I found out last night.”

“Don’t worry,” Ginny assured him. “You’ll never have to see my wrath in the game.”

“No?”

She shook her head. “It would be weird to play with you, I think.” And hurt too much, no matter what the options were, no matter who he picked.

“We could practice dueling instead,” Harry said, grinning at her as he held him orange juice. And it happened again, that strange spark between them as their eyes locked, that feeling like Harry was looking at her like she was an attractive girl, like they could—

No. Ginny pushed that thought aside. She was getting ahead of herself. They were friends now, maybe something more. Something that was different than just siblings, as he had said the night before.

Harry was emotionally stunted as it was. She knew he wasn’t ready yet for what she wanted. But she could wait. She had done so for years now.

“I have to go sign up for pitch times for March,” Harry said, putting down his fork. “Want to come?”

“Sure,” Ginny said, taking one final bite of toast before standing. Hooch’s office was in the most southern part of the castle on the ground floor. Other people thought it was weird that the flying instructor wasn’t higher in the air, but it made perfect sense to Ginny: the ground floor was the most accessible to the outdoors.



“Where are Ron and Hermione?” Ginny asked as they traversed the corridors. “I know Ron sleeps in, but Hermione’s usually the earliest riser of your group.”

Harry put his hands in his pockets. “She’s been busy.”

“More of your distracting, secret planning?” Ginny asked lightly, though she really was curious.

Harry nodded, looking kind of embarrassed. “Yeah. She eats breakfast in the library when Ron and I don’t catch her early enough.”

“Fun.” Ginny made a mental note to invite the girl to a meal the next time she saw her. “I don’t suppose you want to tell me what you’re working on.”

The corridor was empty in the early morning as they made their way to Hooch’s office. Harry was saved from answering when the professor noticed them through her open door; she waved them both in happily, presenting the official schedule of practice dates. Harry, who had never struck Ginny as particularly organized, pulled a sheet of dates from his back pocket and began negotiating with times and dates. It was all rather fun actually.

“You’re only allowed to sign up for five times every week,” he explained as they left. “So it is this game to see when the other captains sign up. Sometimes Hufflepuff pretends like they aren’t practicing at all, waiting until everyone else has chosen their schedules before going to see her.”

“Angelina probably threatened Hooch’s life a few times last year,” Ginny said, though the explanation certainly explained why Angelina had encouraged informal practices for the Chasers.

“Hooch told me she’s been harassed, threatened, and even survived an attempted hexing by captains,” Harry said with a half smile. “If we’re still in the running before our Ravenclaw game, I’ll have to consider physical violence myself.”

Ginny laughed. "Or you could try to have field trips to Spinner's End for practices."

"No," Harry said, leading her up a set of stairs. "I don't know Betsy or the Beaters well enough for that."

Ginny was reminded that what was fitting for most teenagers wasn't applicable for her celebrity friend.

As they stepped off the staircase that had lifted them to the ninth floor of a tower, Harry surprised her by hopping up to sit on the ledge as he asked, "What do you remember about the diary?"

Shocked by the question, Ginny didn't answer as she moved to sit beside him. "The diary itself?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I mean, I know it didn't feel evil to me when I found it in Moaning Myrtle's loo, but I was wondering if there was anything about it that made it feel special."

"Besides making me black out and commit crimes?" she asked. Bluntness tended to curb awkwardness. "I don't know. I—I guess that the strangest thing for me was always how easy it was to find all the time. I would swear I had put it in my drawer, but there it was on my desk. Even in the dark, I just reached out and—Tom was waiting."

He nodded, taking all of this very seriously, before trying for humor. "It didn't seem easy for you to find in my room. You did trash it after all."

"I was too focused to care," Ginny said.

He smiled. "I know how that feels. I destroyed a lot of Professor Dumbledore's office after Sirius died, and I just didn't care."

"Really? What did Professor Dumbledore do?"

Harry shook his head. "That was the most frustrating part. He just sat there patiently taking it."

“Oh, the patient understanding thing,” Ginny said with a grin. “That’s the worst when you’re throwing a tantrum, isn’t it?”

“Took most of the satisfaction away,” Harry said. “My cousin was always good for screaming back. I could make him mad with just a few words.”

Ginny laughed. “You’re secretly mean, too.”

“He deserved it.”

“Beside the point,” Ginny said. “I’ll never look at you the same. You’re human. With flaws. And grudges.”

“You knew that,” Harry said.

“Sure, I did, but now I have a story to spread the news,” Ginny said. “It’s a good day.”

He smiled, and slipped off the seat, and they were walking again, Ginny laughing and Harry smiling more and more as they went.

“So why the sudden question about the diary?” Ginny asked. “Hoping to find another journal that he kept?”

“Not exactly,” Harry said.

Ginny paused. “You could tell me, you know.”

He nodded. “If I were going to tell anyone else, it would be you. I promise. But I have to handle this alone.”

“With Hermione and Ron,” Ginny corrected. Much as it pained her to be left aside, she was comforted that Harry wasn’t alone.

“I didn’t want to make them help either,” Harry said ruefully. “They didn’t have to stay with me.”

Stupid boy, thinking he was defensible. “They love you.”

He looked uncomfortable, and veered the conversation. "All that stuff we talked about in that first D.A. meeting, they were there, too. Helped me beat a troll, set a dragon free, collect the sorcerer's stone, illegally time travel to help an escaped convict..."

"All before you turned fourteen," Ginny said, aching a little inside for the closeness that was so apparent in Harry's friendships with Ron and Hermione, closeness bred through years of adventures and dangers.

Harry's light smile slipped a bit. "They stood in front of me when we first met Sirius. They thought he was a mass murderer who wanted to kill me, and they just jumped in front of me and said he'd have to kill them first."

The combination of disbelief and disapproval in his voice was awful.

"Of course they did," Ginny said, touching his arm. "There are a lot of us who want to fight with you. And we're also the ones who know that you'd never want us to, so we'd be rather stubborn about it."

Harry scoffed. "Trust me, I know. Having you, Luna, and Neville with us at the Ministry wasn't part of the plan."

Ginny waved that off. "That wasn't even for you. I just wanted to ride a Thestral."

Harry laughed.

It brought her comfort to watch him when he was at ease, when he was comfortable. His emotions ran through his expression and body language much more smoothly and cleanly when he was comfortable. Which was rare these days. But at the moment the tension was gone, melted away, leaving the taller, stronger, older Harry in front of her.

"So what are you doing making a potion with Theo Nott?" Harry asked. "He's better than Hermione in that class, you know. It drives her spare."

"I thought you were better than her at Defense," Ginny said. "Is she mad about that?"

"I'm her friend," Harry said. "She's still mad, but tries to hide it by studying more."

"Well, I'm top of my year, or right up there with Devon anyway, and I had an extra credit project that I quit, but not before impressing him with my knowledge." A slightly screwed version of the truth, but that hardly mattered.

"I would think he'd ask Devon for help," Harry said, looking down at her.

Ginny hadn't thought of that and said so. "Maybe he wants a different point of view."

"Well, you certainly are different," Harry said, though his tone failed to indicate whether that was a good or bad thing.

"No need to flatter me, Harry. I already know I'm awesome," she said with a smile.

He laughed. "You're certainly not lacking for confidence."

"I'm the best Quidditch player in school," Ginny said with a grin. "What's there to be feel bad about?"

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Unlike usual, the Potions classroom was blistering hot that night when Ginny entered after dinner. Five cauldrons were burning around the room, one with steam overflowing liberally onto the stone floor. In the midst of the bustle, Theo Nott was stirring one potion while taking notes, his sleeves rolled up over his elbows.

"I see you started without me," Ginny said, stripping off her robe, and throwing it on a workbench.

"You're late," he said without looking over.

"I'm early," she corrected, stepping up beside him to look into the bubbling cauldron.

"Cover that cauldron," he said, nodding at the one on the far left.

"Literally?" she asked.

"I'm always literal."

"Good to know." Ginny hurried over and put a large wood lid over the top of the cauldron, peeking in just long enough to assess what kind of potion it was. "Is this the Replenishing Elixir?"

"Yes," he said, tossing a sprinkle of grass into his cauldron, which immediately turned bright green, sparking once and settling. "I need to find a way to include a week's worth of nutrients into this Sleeping Potion without adding more than five cups of potion."

She crushed two seeds and uncovered the elixir just long enough to add them. "You're lucky I don't think anything's impossible."

"I chose you to help me because Devon told me you had that attitude," Theo said, turning the heat off the fourth cauldron. "Though I was assured you were more pragmatic than a doddering Hufflepuff."

Ginny grinned. "Tell me about the modifications you made to the base potion, and what order you're adding the potions in."

He did just that, explaining what each of the cauldron's held and what he planned to do with everything. Ginny helped by tweaking the potions and discussing ideas for mixtures.

"You should have asked me to help before you made all of these," Ginny said.

"I'm not asking you to help me with this batch. This is to test the longevity of the new mixture. I want to be able to promise eight hours of sleep exactly," he said.

“Lofty goal,” Ginny said. “Did you include dragon’s blood to weaken—”

“Not the current problem,” he said, passing her five rolls of parchment. “Those are the ingredients in all of the potions I’m combining.”

She waved them irritably. “You can’t just combine mixture like this. You need to start with an empty cauldron.”

“Your function is to help me create a more potent Replenishing Elixir, not challenge my methods.”

“It won’t matter if I could make you not have to eat for a month,” Ginny said. “The process would have to include two heating and freezing cycles to extract the juices from the centipedes that I would use, which would make any potion with nutmeg poisonous.”

“Think of way not to make my potion poisonous,” Theo said, pouring half the cauldron of Thickening Solution into the new Sleeping Potion.

Ginny sat at the desk, spreading the five parchments before her. “Where’s your T-Chart?”

He waved over his head. “In my bag.”

The chart tracked the influence of all ingredients according to the three Doppler rules. “Why haven’t you slowed the stirring process in the first mixture?”

“The viability of the second lasts five minutes,” Theo said, and they spent the next three hours discussing the process used. The chart was useful, as were the lists of ingredients, but the most enlightening thing was simply watching Theodore Nott handle his cauldrons.

He moved through the room with slick grace, sliding between cauldrons and lifting them manually, insisting that the instability in Hovering Charms could ruin everything. He stirred precisely, immediately saw and adjusted to the slightest change in the potion consistency, and kept meticulous notes.

And he made it all look easy.

The worst part was that he knew how good he was, how brilliant. He practically reeked of confidence that bordered on arrogance, and she had to admit that it was attractive. And even though doing so almost made her sick, Ginny couldn't help but ask why he was doing something a few times, to which he responded directly, if a bit condescendingly. When she questioned his choices, his defenses were well thought-out and proven by various experts.

However, he never improvised, never threw ingredients in without knowing precisely what was about to happen. Never broke the steadfast rules laid out in the potion journals that the experts relied on. She couldn't improve his technique or tell him anything he didn't already know, but she could make him think differently.

"I could make your potion better," Ginny said confidently at the end of the night, when Theo had bottled twenty vials of his final potion, securing each in a long holder and magically binding them to a protected shelf in the back of the room.

"Make a list," Theo said, magically drying his sweaty arms. The second spell he used made him smell rather nice.

"And here I always thought you used a potion to spell like that," Ginny said, having decided to write out suggestions later that night.

"I knew you thought about me," he answered arrogantly.

She couldn't help but smile. "I think about the fact that you need me to finish this project."

"I need no one."

"Pleasant," Ginny said, shaking her head as she picked up her robe and threw it over her arm.

"Always," he said as he opened the door for her. The cold hit her like a blast.



“Did you really need to keep the fires so hot?” she asked.

“If I wanted you to take off your robes, I did,” he said with a smirk.

She ducked her head as she smiled. “You always have ulterior motives?”

“It’s a Nott family rule: if you’re doing something for a single reason, that’s the reason not to do it,” he recited as they walked down the corridor.

“That sounds like a tiring way to live,” Ginny said seriously.

He half-rolled his eyes. “I suppose you do everything you do because it’s right?”

“Well, I normally have one clear reason for the things I do, whether it’s right or not,” Ginny said, shrugging. “Not all the time, but most of the time.”

“That sounds lazy,” he said as they walked through the bare, stone corridors.

“What are your reasons for asking for my help?” she couldn’t help but ask.

His lip curled. “I wanted to see how good you were at potions, and whether you could actually help me, which I doubted.”

“Doubted in past tense?”

“I’m still deciding.”

Curious. “Well, that sounds like you only have two reasons. That’s underachieving.”

He gave a full-blown smirk. “Devon told me you were interesting. I also was curious about the last daughter of the last Prewett, the seventh daughter, and the Gryffindor girl who broke into the Ministry last year. You provide a link to a group that I am interested in learning

more about, and you seem the most comfortable with making new friends.”

His tone sounded a little sinister, but she put that out of her mind, along with the dozens of questions she had about where he got his information. Questioning his knowledge would draw attention to the fact that it bothered her, giving him power.

Instead, she lightly teased, “So I’m being used.”

“Pleasantly, I hope.”

She shook her head. “I don’t really understand you.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No. I love challenges,” she said, pausing at the top of the stairs in main hall. “Aren’t you walking away from your house?”

He motioned for her to continue. “I don’t let girls walk alone at night.”

Ginny crossed her arms. “I’m not a meek little witch in need of protection.”

“I wouldn’t bother with you if you were,” he said, nodding for her to continue nonetheless.

She didn’t budge. “Sure you would. You’d have a dozen reasons.”

He shook his head. “Some personality traits overpower all reasons.”

Ginny shook her head, letting him have his way. “You’re a master of backward flattery, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” He nodded as they continued their trek. “Among other things.”

“Not humility.”

“Humility is the practice of self-delusion,” Theo said, making her smile as he reminded her of Charlie for a moment. Their animation and

good humor were immediately arrested as they turned the corner into the foyer between the entrance to the school and the Great Hall.

Standing in the doorway, speaking with Dumbledore and periodically nodding or shaking his head, standing close to his sister with a grave but thoughtful expression on his finely chiseled face, was Baron Ramsey.

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## CHAPTER 11

### New Proposals

Ginny had stopped dead at the sight of the Ramsey twins at the end of the dark corridor. They were talking with Headmaster Dumbledore beside the closed entrance doors. Seeing her grin disappear, Theo turned abruptly to find the cause.

"Ah," he said quietly, taking in the scene with his usual calculating glance.

Ginny took a moment to determine that the conversation wasn't private before walking toward the small group.

Theo lifted his chin and perfected his already-stiff posture as he joined her. "Have you considered that they might not want to talk to you?"

"I'll consider it in a minute," she replied, a tight knot in her stomach as her shoes lightly padded against the stone floor. "Did you know they were coming back tonight?"

He didn't look at her. "No"

Gretchen Ramsey was the first to notice them, looking more fragile than Ginny thought possible with her long dark hair pulled back from her pale face in a loose plait. Her weary blue eyes lit up slightly when they were close enough to recognize.

"Hello Theo," she said quietly, a small smile gracing pale her lips. "Ginny."

"Hey Gretchen," Theo said, rocking on his toes as if trying to decide whether or not to move forward. Gretchen made the choice for him when she reached out and pulled the tall boy in to a hug.

Dumbledore and Baron watched the exchange with less surprise than Ginny before Baron turned to talk to the Gryffindor, saying, "It's good to see you, Ginevra."

"You too, Baron," Ginny said, fighting the urge to look away from his intense gaze. Baron had a tendency to make her feel like she was the only person in the room. "I'm glad you're back."

He nodded, still watching her with his dark eyes. "It's a comfort to be among familiar, busy corridors."

"That's good," Ginny said, and if she hadn't been overwhelmed by his general presence, she would have been wondering why she was so particularly ineloquent tonight.

"You're keeping new company," Baron said to Ginny, nodding at Theo.

"We were working on a potion," she explained, mostly for the headmaster's benefit since it was so late, though her focus remained on her handsome friend.

Baron nodded. "Theodore has a gift for potions."

"Thank you for saying so, Baron," Theo said, joining their conversation so abruptly that Ginny actually felt surprised by the intrusion. Odd.

"He only says it because it's true," Gretchen Ramsey said, and there was a sense of closeness in the group that Ginny hadn't anticipated, as if they were all friends. Having only ever seen Theo interact politely with Devon, Ginny had unknowingly begun to think of her aloof friend as rather detached from their peers. It was nice to see that she was wrong.

"It is also true," Dumbledore said, gesturing down the hall with his dead-looking hand, "that it is quite late. I have not the excuse of potion making to keep me from my study any longer."

"Of course," Baron said, ever the composed Head Boy.

"It is good to have you back, Mr. Ramsey, Miss Ramsey," Dumbledore said, inclining his head at the dark-haired twins. "My door is always open, even if all you desire is tea."

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore," Baron said, extending his right hand despite being left-handed. Dumbledore shook it with his healthy hand, and repeated the gesture with Gretchen. Ginny had grown accustomed to the headmaster's sick-looking hand, but Barn and Gretchen, who must have seen it for the first time tonight, gave no hint of a reaction to it.

"Good night, professor," Ginny said, remembering her manners just barely.

"Good night, Miss Weasley, Mr. Nott," he said before striding off down the dark corridor and turning around a corner. Ginny had a flash of memory of Dumbledore carrying his dishes to the sink at Grimmauld Place, with a smile. How much had changed in a few short months.

"Did you Portkey into town and ride the carriage up?" Theo asked the twins.

Gretchen's face tightened. "Yes."

Baron touched his sister's arm, and she relaxed. Theo looked at them with understanding, and it took a moment for Ginny to realize what had affected them; Luna had mentioned it before: the twins now saw the Thestrals.

Theo put his hands in his pockets "Well, I am glad you're back. The Hufflepuff Head Girl is insufferably tedious in the corridors when she thinks she has to be both Head Girl and Boy."

Baron looked at him with patient bemusement. "I'm sure she's done well, but we'll have to discuss what happened while I was away."

"Are you back for good, then?" Ginny asked, surprised by how anxious she was for the answer. Gretchen smiled grimly.

"We always planned to come back," Baron said, glancing at his sister. "Arrangements required extra attention, however."

"Is everything settled?" Theo asked curiously.

"Not by half," Gretchen said, shaking her head. She looked thin under her school robes; her uniform didn't fit. "But the estate is being settled as quickly as possible. Thanks, in part, to you grandmother."

"Grandma Caldwell?" Theo, who had displayed a wide array of emotion over the course of the night, sounded affectionate, though he tempered with a half-smirk.

"Yes. Our main proprietor and I had a meeting with the Wizengamot regarding our family's seat," she said. "Minister Bones felt I was too young to take it, and after hours of argument, I was frustrated. Your grandmother heard about it from your grandfather, and she took me to a late lunch."

"She's a rather nice lady." Theo admitted, with the same almost-sweet look he had worn at the first mention of his grandmother. Who knew the snarkiest, most sarcastic boy in the school had a soft spot for his elderly relative?

"I can't believe the Minister tried to take away your family seat," Ginny said. There were one-hundred seventy-six seats on the Wizengamot and about twenty of them were always maintained by lineage.

"The Minister objected due to my age and inability to travel for votes," Gretchen said with a small incredulous shake of her head. "That's been cleared up since we are both of legal age, and Theo's grandfather dismissed the charge about immobility out of hand, mentioning that I currently live in the castle where the last Head Mugwump resided during his tenure."

Theo lips curled on the right side as if he was fighting a genuine smile. "Clever."

"Your grandparents have been wonderful to us," Baron added seriously. "We can't thank them enough."

“I’m sure they would say there’s no need to thank them. They respected your parents a great deal, just as I did. You’ll always be able to count on the Caldwells as your allies, and despite my mother and father”—and at the mention of his parents Theo’s face briefly grew briefly dark—“the Notts as well. ”

The anger and steel lacing his words made Ginny curious about Theo’s relationship with his parents. She had always assumed that the children of Death Eaters worshipped them like Draco Malfoy. Looking at Theo’s tense, formal stance, she realized how stupid that assumption was. Of course things were more complex than that.

“We know we can trust you,” Gretchen said.

“And the Weasleys,” Ginny said, drawing the eyes of the three Slytherins. A flash of embarrassment went through her, but she didn’t let it settle. Yes, they were all from rich and powerful families with the best blood pedigree, but her mother’s words echoed in her head. You are as pure as they are. And Ginny knew that the Weasleys were going to be in this fight. All of them. And they would be good allies.

“Can you promise such a thing?” Gretchen asked, quietly curious.

“Yours is a family embroiled more fully in this war than most,” Baron said directly to Ginny, his deep brown eyes locked on her. “Their allegiance would be an honor, but difficult to attain.”

This was such a strange reaction. “Well, I know my brother Ron generally doesn’t like Slytherins, but he’s a git, so it doesn’t matter. I’m your ally, at any rate. And I reckon Harry is, too. And my family would be if they knew you.”

Her rambling was punctuated by an unbearable silence, where Ginny wondered if she had made any sense.

“Your father was the first person who spoke to me from the Ministry the night our parents were killed,” Gretchen said, pulling Ginny’s attention away from Baron. “For the most part, the Aurors ignored us, the politicians floundered, and assistants avoided us.”



"Grief scares people," Theo said seriously. Then his eyes slid to Ginny. "Most people. Not Ginny."

"Nor her father," Gretchen continued, "who asked me if I needed anything or if I would like him to escort me to another room. He even asked if I'd like him to help me Floo to another residence for the night. It meant a lot to me."

Ginny thought of her kind, personable father. "Dad was worried about you."

"But it is his place to offer an allegiance," Gretchen said. "And he didn't. So while I appreciate your sentiment, I will count you alone as an ally among your family, if you don't mind."

Oh. Now Ginny understood, and after a moment's thought, she kind of appreciated Gretchen's beliefs. "My family is going to fight against the people who killed your parents."

All three of the Slytherin's faces darkened, but none more than Theo, whose anger was palpable as he said, "As will we all."

The mood was almost oppressive.

"Yes, we will," Gretchen confirmed, "but for now, I'm tired and rather cold." She stole a glance at her brother before turning to Theo. "Will you walk me to the dorm, Theo?"

He blinked at her, glancing briefly at Ginny as if for permission to leave. She nodded.

"I'd be glad to escort the youngest member of the Wizengamot," Theo said, inclining his head.

Gretchen smiled genuinely for the first time. "I'm not going to talk politics with you, Theodore. I want to know about this List that I've heard so much about."

This time, Theo actually laughed. "You would hear about that even isolated from school."

"I've been told that I am the most feared girl at Hogwarts."

"As if you ever doubted it," Theo said, extending his arm toward the corridor as if directing her to start walking. He glanced over his shoulder. "Don't forget to try to be useful for our next potion making session, Ginny."

"Oh, go away, you git. I'll see you later, Gretchen," she returned with a smile as Theo turned back. He and Gretchen walked about a foot apart, a sense of comfort between them.

"You look good, Ginevra," Baron said.

"Thank you." She hated that she blushed. It made her feel like a first year. But looking up at Baron's face, she couldn't help but throw her arms around him in a hug. "I'm so sorry about your parents."

He squeezed her back much more forcefully than she had expected he would.

"Thank you," he returned, with a hint of emotion in his voice. Ginny shut her eyes tightly at the awareness that it took something soul-shaking to make such a reserved and private guy show even that much.

As they broke apart, Ginny wiped her eyes with a swipe of her finger.

"We received your flowers," he said, reaching into the inside pocket of his robe and pulling out a plain white envelope, which he handed to her. "I thought I would deliver the thank you note in person."

She held the envelope without opening it. "You didn't have to write a thank you, and the flowers were from my whole family."

"We appreciated the thought," he said, bypassing her entire point instead of arguing. Fine.

"I mean it, anything that you and Gretchen need, I'm your girl," she said, turning the envelope over in her hands. Baron smiled. Not the brilliant one she had seen after the first Quidditch match, but a soft, sweet one.

"We're grateful, I promise you," Baron assured her. "The first daughter in seven generations certainly is a valuable ally."

"How do you know about that?" How did everyone? She herself had only learned that fact this past summer.

"I know a lot about you," he said.

"You're lucky I like you, otherwise that could have been really creepy," Ginny said with a smile, trying to quell the strange sensation in her stomach. He was such an anomaly in her life: proper, distance, refined. He had always struck her as a rather grown-up, and in the wake of his parents' deaths, there was no doubt that he was a man now.

"I wanted to discuss the Seventh Year Ball with you," he said, and his formal syntax threw her again. He was seventeen.

"I can't believe you've had time to think about that," she said honestly. Sure, Bill and Charlie and even Percy had all spent a large portion of their seventh years on the topic, but with everything... well.

"I'd like you to go with me," he said, taking her by surprise. She couldn't speak for a moment, trying to confirm in her mind that he had actually asked her. Then her mouth curved into a small smile.

"I'd love to go with you to the Ball," she returned pleasantly. He smiled again, and this time it was that smile from the Quidditch match.

"Good," Baron said, clearly content.

Feeling strangely light in the wake of the invitation, Ginny teasingly said, "You're just using me to fend off your unwanted suitors, aren't you?"

“No,” he said in his deep, serious voice. “You were the one I most wanted to take.”

“Oh.” His sincerity surprised her, ruining her attempt to lighten the mood. Theo would have teased her back. “Well, thanks.”

“Thank you,” he said, taking her hand and kissing the back of it quickly. “It will be a better night, having you by my side.”

Ginny sobered the moment his lips touched her skin. Her hand tingling, she said, quite stupidly, “I hope so.”

He motioning down the corridor, “Shall we?”

“Shall we what?” she asked, a little overwhelmed.

“Walk back to your common room.”

If he were anyone else, she might have jokingly said that things were going too quickly. Instead, she settled on the truth.

“I was just telling Theo that I didn’t need an escort.”

“And yet he was still walking with you,” Baron said, waiting for her, “because he is polite.”

Polite wasn’t exactly a word Ginny might think to use when describing Theo Nott. Wily, snide, smart, or even funny, sure. But polite? Maybe.

“Alright,” she said, beginning to walk beside him.

They spent the relatively short walk talking about mindless, safe topics like Quidditch and class and the potion that Ginny and Theo were working on, though she edited herself to keep from sharing too much about his project.

Then the topic suddenly changed when Ginny asked, “Why is Gretchen taking the Wizengamot seat instead of you?”

Baron's rubbed his thumb and pointer finger together. "She had a greater desire than I to work in politics. She'll also take our seat on the Hogwarts Board of Governors."

"Wow," Ginny said, slowly ascending the stairs that led to Gryffindor's floor. "Will you do anything like that?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I'm going to be too busy for such pursuits."

"Oh?" Ginny was proud to have resisted the urge to rudely ask what he was planning to do.

He answered her unasked question anyway. "I've been accepted into the Auror training program. I start in the Fall."

Ginny completely stopped walking, turning to stare at him. "Really?"

"Yes," he said, nodding. "I begin in August."

"That's wonderful," she said earnestly. The difficulty of being accepted into such a program was well known, and people said that even famous names couldn't sway the admissions board. Since Mad-Eye Moody was in charge of that board, Ginny thought that the rumors were probably right.

"Thank you."

She paused, glancing at the portrait of the Fat Lady, who was clearly trying to hear what they were saying. "Did you... always... want to be an Auror?"

"Yes," he said, his tone clearly indicating that he knew why she asked. "It's an honor to defend our world from those who choose a darker path."

She looked up at this tall friend and swelled with pride for him. "I'm so happy for you."

“Thank you again,” he said, leading her closer to the Fat Lady. “But I have to say good night now.”

“Thanks for walking me up here, Baron,” Ginny said, even if it wasn’t really necessary. The gesture was nice.

“It was my pleasure,” he said with that soft, sincere look that he always wore. Theo was intriguing because Ginny never really knew what he was up to and could never pin down how exactly he felt about her. Baron was just the opposite: proud and blunt and honest. What a strangely large span of Slytherins Ginny had befriended this year. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You will,” she agreed before saying the password to the Fat Lady, who looked scandalized.

“There’s a Slytherin student right behind you,” the Fat Lady said.

“He’s the Head Boy,” Ginny replied, and the portrait swung open, muttering about heart attacks and students and stress.

“Good night, Ginevra,” he said, bowing before walking away.

“Baron!” she called just as he was almost out of sight, suddenly remembering their rapidly approaching Quidditch match. He turned to face her, looking expectant. “I’m glad you’re back in time to practice before our game,” she said sweetly; then she smirked. “You’re going to need it.”

And then he laughed. He actually laughed. It really was a beautiful sight.

“I would wish you luck,” he said, “but I’m not quite so generous as you, I’m afraid.” Ginny and Baron each stood for a moment, enjoying the smiles on each other’s faces, before setting off in opposite directions. Ginny supposed she ought to go to sleep sometime that day.

On the cold Wednesday afternoon before their match in late February, Katie Bell, Betsy Moran, and Ginny were stretching in the Quidditch locker room after a particularly grueling Chasers practice that evening.

"My nose is still attached to my face right?" Ginny asked, poking it with a gloved finger.

Katie laughed. "Yes."

"It's a little red, though," Betsy said, hands wrapped around her toes. She was amazingly flexible.

"It's tingling. That's good. I think that's good. I can feel it," Ginny said, still wrapped in her warm scarf despite heating charms in the building. If Harry's pitch at Spinner's End could be heated, why couldn't Hogwarts do the same?

"Yes, that's good," Betsy said, stretching her hands above her head and making her shirt hike up a few inches.

"Hey! What's that?" Ginny asked, pointing to a large, ugly bruise on the girl's lower ribcage.

"Oh!" Betsy said, tugging down her shirt self-consciously. "Nothing. A Bludger hit me."

Katie looked as concerned as Ginny felt, if not quite as alarmed. "That isn't from a Bludger."

"It's nothing," Betsy said again, but Ginny was standing now, unwilling to let her little friend leave without an explanation.

"We're on your team," Ginny said. "You can trust us."

Betsy looked back and forth between Katie and Ginny before sighing. "It's not a big deal."

"A bruise like that is a big deal," Katie said quietly, and it was clear that even Katie wasn't about to let Betsy leave.

"Promise not to tell my brother?" Betsy asked.

"Of course," Ginny said while Katie remained silent.

“A few of my friends and I—well, we knew about Harry’s club last year, the one Umbridge banned, and we thought it was a good idea, but we’re too young to really do anything, you know? And even though I know Harry as my captain, I didn’t want to just ask him if he could teach a bunch of younger students, you know?” Betsy babbled when nervous. “So we asked Professor Wrightman for some help. Extra lessons sort of. And she agreed as long as we had the same number of students from all the houses, which was really hard, but we found a couple fourth years in Slytherin and a few in our year, and now the professor’s helping all of us.”

The warm changing room was silent for a moment.

“Professor Wrightman?” Ginny asked.

Betsy nodded, looking much more relaxed after Ginny and Katie failed to react violently to the news. “She’s been really helpful. I mastered the Disarming Spell at last.”

Katie smiled. “That’s wonderful for you.”

Betsy beamed. “It is. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but—”

“It’s alright,” Ginny said, wondering why she had thought Betsy looked so young. She was older than Ginny had been when she had decided to fight. Older than Harry was when he faced Voldemort alone for the second time.

“Harry gave us the idea,” Betsy said, picking up her broom. “Because we don’t have to be old to fight. Just prepared.”

The door to the locker room shut behind her with a quiet click, leaving Ginny and Katie alone as snow began to fall outside. Ginny shook her head to clear her thoughts as she pulled on her snow boots and heavy cloak, joining Katie at the door a few minutes later to make the trek up to the castle together.

“It’s kind of strange to hear her talk about Harry like that,” Katie said as they walked out into the wall of cold.



Hands burrowed in her pockets, Ginny shrugged. "You mean after they hated him last year?"

"I suppose that, too," Katie said through her scarf. "But more because I always think of Harry as the eleven year old I met six years ago."

A gust of wind kept Ginny from saying anything.

"Oliver simply loved Harry, of course," Katie remembered with an amused smile. "He'd tell Harry to get the snitch or die trying, and Harry would fall off his broom halfway through a match with the snitch lodged in his mouth. While we all went to see that he wasn't dead, Oliver wanted to know if he caught it. And Harry, small and probably harboring a dozen bruises like Betsy's, held up the snitch like that it was more important than his health."

Ginny laughed. "The twins told me about that. They were furious with Oliver."

"They always looked out for Harry. They're his life Beaters, they used to say." Katie shook her head softly. "I can't remember the number of times we visited him in the Hospital Wing, looking beaten and broken with a grin on his face."

They passed the end of the pitch and made their way up the stone steps toward the looming castle.

"He's a really good player," Ginny said through the bitter cold, adjusting her scarf quickly to cover her ears.

"Yes, he is," Katie said fondly. "Harry could be a professional Quidditch player, but I asked him once if he was talking to scouts. He looked surprised, and said the only career he ever really considered was being an Auror."

Ginny thought of Baron and Harry and the drive they felt to join the elite fighting force. Neither would ever feel they were doing enough if they weren't on the front lines.

“He’ll be a good Auror,” Ginny said, acknowledging that it was something she found attractive in him: his need to do the right thing, to be good. Avoiding the spotlight and coming in at the end to save them all. He’s the lynchpin, Ginny thought, remembering Sirius’s words from so long ago.

“He’d be a good pro Quidditch player, too,” Katie said, but Ginny remembered something her mother once told her when Ginny asked about her uncles, Gideon and Fabian. Molly Weasley had talked about destiny and pain, and how some people are willing to take up more responsibility than they need to so that others can live carefree lives. Ginny couldn’t imagine Harry being happy unless he was helping other people.

“Well, we’ll just have to make sure we win the cup this year if he won’t go pro,” Ginny said as they reached the shelter of the castle together.

The hubbub leading up to the Slytherin-Gryffindor game on Saturday lacked its usual animosity. Sure, there was bitterness over the attacks, and many did associate the Death Eaters with the Slytherins and their parents, but for every resentful student, there was another who would quietly mention the Ramseys, and the tension would dissipate.

“The prefects won’t stand for it,” Kerney told Ginny after scolding a group of second year Ravenclaws and Slytherins. “Not after Wrightman’s speech.”

“What speech?” Ginny asked, stepping through the portrait hole into the common room.

“She spoke at the Prefects meeting with Professor McGonagall about unifying the school, and not letting tragedy destroy us from within,” Kerney said. It made Ginny think of Betsy’s group tutoring session. Was Wrightman really trying to bring the school together on her own? Gryffindor and Slytherin had been fighting for centuries.

“You think that’s possible?” Ginny asked, climbing up the stairs to their room.

Kerney shrugged. "Wrightman was pretty persuasive, and the Slytherins have reacted really strangely to the attacks."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked, tugging open their door.

"It's like they finally realized that we are in the middle of a war," Kerney said. "The breakouts, the disappearances last year, Cedric Diggory, none of that made them pause. But this latest group of attacks... I don't know. It's different."

Of course it was different. The Ramseys were an old Slytherin family. It made the pruebloods realize they were vulnerable no matter what house they were in. Kerney, a Muggle-born, didn't seem to understand that.

"The Ramseys were a prominent family," Ginny explained, switching out her Herbology book and notes for her Potions supplies.

"I don't know about that, but I know the fights end quickly when they're mentioned, and if Baron's there, all the younger years are on their best behavior. It's good," Kerney said, slumping back on her bed.

"I'll see you later," Ginny said, shouldering her bag.

Kerney waved without opening her eyes. "I'm going to take a nap."

"Don't you mean go to sleep for the night?" They had just returned from dinner.

"I have too much work to do to sleep through the night. Just a quick nap," Kerney assured her.

"Alright," Ginny said, heading out. "Guess I'll see you later."

Kerney made an incoherent noise that sounded like agreement, making Ginny smile.

She had almost decided to skip this Potions review with Devon in light of the game, but the truth was that she really wanted to spend some time with Harry away from the Quidditch pitch and large groups.

He was still busy, and the little three-person reviews were a nice chance to talk.

Maybe that was why she was so disappointed to walk into the study room and find just Devon, who raised an eyebrow at Ginny's obvious face, but didn't say anything.

"Hey Devon," she said, sitting across from her.

"Hello Ginny." As always, Devon had her notes splayed across a large teacher's desk and there were notes written on the chalkboard. She always came early.

"Trying to figure out how we weakened the Calming Draught?" Ginny asked, looking at the equations. Devon had circled the liter of water.

"I have it narrowed down to two steps."

"Good," Ginny said. They both had to write an essay explaining their mistake that was due to Snape in a week. "By the way, do you think you could give Theo a scroll from me? It's about his project."

"You can't deliver it yourself?"

"I saw him in the corridor yesterday, and he practically snarled at a first year that accidentally bumped into him, and then proceeded to breeze by me when I said something about it," Ginny said, pulling the scroll from her meticulous bag.

Devon took it. "Ignore him. He's in a mood."

"Any particular reason?" Ginny asked, unscrewing her inkbottle.

"My parents are coming to watch the Slytherin-Gryffindor match this Saturday."

"And that upsets him?" Ginny asked, dapping her quill with ink.

"He isn't fond of them."

"Well, he could just avoid them and not be a stupid prat about it," Ginny said. This was a strange side of her new friend.

"He's having dinner with us afterward in Hogsmeade," Devon said.

"Oh." Ginny had to admit that she didn't understand the problem. Sure, some people were unpleasant, but that didn't mean you had to go around biting everyone's heads off in anticipation of having to spend some time with them. "He should still have a better attitude."

Devon waved her elegant hand. "He'll handle it."

"With grace, no doubt," Ginny said sarcastically.

"As always."

"Sorry I'm late," Harry said as he came in, books practically falling out of his hands and bag slipping off his shoulder. For someone who was so gifted at dueling, he looked rather sloppy. Devon apparently agreed as she levitated his books over to the table.

"Help us correct our Calming Draught, and we'll be even," Ginny said, easily letting her conversation with Devon go.

"If you two messed it up, I don't think I can help," Harry said, looking at the board nonetheless. It was true that he wasn't better than them at Potions. In fact, as the year went on, his interest in studying to take the N.E.W.T.s had waned to the point where Ginny wondered why he came to the meetings at all. Not that she would ever ask him. She enjoyed his company too much.

"Maybe you'll notice something we missed," Devon said, still glaring at the steps on the board.

"Unless it has to do with Quidditch, I can't really judge it right now," Harry said, scratching his cheek.

"Well, don't accidentally tell Devon anything about Quidditch," Ginny said. "She's the enemy, you know."

“Because I care so much for the sport,” Devon said sardonically.

Harry laughed. “You’re a welcome relief, actually. Everyone else seems to have ideas and plans and suggestions.”

“Ignore them,” Ginny said. “You’ve been doing just fine this far.”

“Another piece of advice,” Devon said.

“That’s alright,” Harry said. “Ginny’s on the team, and actually helpful. It’s people like Dean who I just don’t care about. Football doesn’t translate into Quidditch!”

Devon glanced at Ginny, who shrugged at the reference.

“I think the temperature of the water cooled the potion,” Devon said, forcing all three of them to refocus on the board in front of them. It was going to be a long night.

The game itself had been surprisingly uneventful for a Gryffindor-Slytherin match. No one tried to kill Harry; Slytherin’s team had been all male and very aggressive. But Gryffindor had prevailed in the end, and Harry had once again sent Draco Malfoy plummeting into the ground without the Snitch.

The match had lasted for nearly six hours before the little gold ball had deigned to make an appearance. Harry made short work of it, once it did, but in the meantime Chasers and Beaters alike were thoroughly wearing themselves out. Ginny had never been more exhausted from playing Quidditch.

“I just want to lay here and pretend like I don’t have to go back out into the cold,” Ginny said, reclining back on the bench in the heated changing room in her full uniform.

Katie grinned. “It was a good game.”

Baron had played a splendid game, and Slytherin had actually been ahead in goals due to Ron losing his head at Malfoy’s taunting about two-thirds of the way through. Ginny had been impressed with her

brother's growing skill until he had become unhinged at whatever Draco had said to him just past the four-hour mark. After that the Gryffindors had been hard-pressed to quash the scoring tear of the Slytherin Chasers.

Gryffindor would have been in the lead if Betsy Moran hadn't missed three penalty shots. The Slytherin Beaters had clearly made a point of shaking up the young third-year Chaser, and the poor girl had been too nervous to out-manuever Baron's excellent Keeping skills.

"Betsy's still outside celebrating with Stevie," Katie said after she and Ginny had showered and changed.

"I hurt too much to celebrate," Ginny said, pulling on her heavy cloak. She paused a moment. "Wow. I'm being really whiney, aren't I?"

"You were very hurt in the game," Katie allowed.

Ginny had come out of the match with a broken wrist and a black eye, following a collision with Malfoy at one point during hour three. He had swerved in front of her as she raced to claim a loose Quaffle, forcing her to slam right into him. Being several inches shorter and much lighter than Malfoy, Ginny had come off much worse than the stupid git, but "accidentally" elbowing him in the face as she recovered made her feel somewhat better about things. Her legs were killing her as the broken wrist she sustained had forced her to hold onto her broom and steer with only her legs during the final three hours of the game. Her quadriceps were positively burning.

"But we still won," Ginny said with a grin.

"Yes, we did," Katie smiled. "And I'm going to go join some friends to celebrate. Do you want to come along?"

"No," Ginny said, stepping out into the biting cold. "I think I'm going to see Madam Pomfrey first."

"Alright. I'll see you later," Katie said, waving and running over to her friends who embraced her in a large group hug, making Ginny smile.

She was making her way past the group when someone fell into step beside her. She was surprised to see Theo Nott.

“You look like an abused house-elf,” Theo said.

“I feel like a Bludger,” she said.

“So that’s good then.”

“Ha. Ha.” She winced as the lower eyelid under her bruised eye pulsed. “Remind me to thank your housemate for such a lovely decoration.”

Theo smiled. “I will. After he leaves the Infirmary because of your brutal attack.”

She rolled her eyes. “If I knew I was going to be blamed anyway, I would have really charged at him.”

“Probably after you stole a Beater’s bat.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be having dinner with Devon and her parents right now?” Ginny asked, realizing it.

He looked over at her. “The reservation isn’t for another hour.”

“I would use that time to try to look a bit more decent,” Ginny teased, looking over his impeccable robes and cloak.

“This from the human Bludger,” he said, making her chuckle. Their feet crunched in the freshly fallen snow. “So I hear you’re going to the Seventh Year Ball with Baron Ramsey.”

Ginny turned and looked at her friend with surprise. “That change of subject was sort of abrupt.”

“Segues are for formal conversations.”

She laughed and decided to play along. “Well, then, yes, I am going with Baron. When is your birthday?”



“June 2nd,” he said without missing a beat. “You’re not dating Ramsey.”

“No,” Ginny said, “and you’re not taking Care of Magical Creatures anymore.” It was the most random thing she could think of.

“I lost too many cloaks to the Blast-Ended Skrewts,” he continued nonchalantly. If anyone had ever mastered the proud, Slytherin nonchalance, it was Theo Nott. Actually, the almost haughty casualness kind of reminded her of Sirius.

“So you don’t want one as a pet for a late Christmas gift?” she asked.

“I’m waiting for the second generation,” he said. “Baron’s quite a catch actually. He was on Devon’s shortlist, too.”

“He was. Quite a coincidence that her Slytherin friends suddenly started talking to me, isn’t it?” Ginny asked.

“She’s very smart, my Devon.” The possessive pronoun was interesting.

“Seriously, what’s with the awkward mention of my date that’s nearly four months away?”

“That is a long time in advance to ask someone,” Theo noted.

“Get to your point. I’m tiring of your games, and want to go to the Hospital Wing to have my wrist fixed,” she said, holding it up as if to prove that it was injured.

Instead of answering her, Theo moved her good hand out of the way, and pointed his wand at the injured one. It startled her because it caused them to stop walking, but even more so because it was the first time he had ever touched her skin.

“Don’t shout or do anything embarrassing,” he said. She was about to say that she never would, when he swirled his wand and said the incantation.

"Ow!" she yelled, cringing as the bone instantly reset itself. Another murmur and flick of his wand washed the pain away.

"I told you not to shout," he said.

"I'm weak-willed," Ginny said, rotating the wrist. "Thank you."

"Thank my mother. She was always a fan of Healing Spells," he said with an edge to his words.

"I'm sure you could convey the message," she said as they made their way up the hill to the castle.

"Go to Hogsmeade with me," he said, glancing at her.

Ginny's jaw dropped slightly as she processed the question. "You really aren't a fan of logical conversations."

"Go to Hogsmeade with me," he said again.

"Now?" She resisted the urge to look around to see if anyone else was watching this who could tell her if it was a sincere offer.

"Next month, on the Hogsmeade weekend."

She hadn't heard anything about that. "Was it announced today?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"I thought I wasn't your type," she said, for lack of anything else to say that was at all intelligible. To her credit, however, she wasn't nearly as thrown here as she had been in the corridor when Duncan had asked her.

"You're not."

"That's flattering," she said, coming back into her own. "Why would I go with you if I know you don't want to be with me?"

“Because neither one of us will bore the other to tears with our stupidity over the course of a single day,” he said.

“How romantic.”

“I never claimed to be romantic,” he said. His pleased expression made him look adorable despite his words.

Remembering their previous conversation, she asked, “What are your other reasons?”

He smirked. “I’ll be able to bring it up in conversation tonight at dinner.”

“The fact that you’re going to Hogsmeade with a Gryffindor?”

“Something like that,” he said, nodding.

Thinking of the letters she could write to the twins and Charlie, Ginny grinned herself. “All right. Any other reasons?”

“I like you,” he said. “You’re smart, pretty, and laugh when I joke.”

She blushed. “That’s not your type?”

“No,” he said.

“I don’t understand you,” she admitted.

“I’m the son of a Death Eater, Ginny,” he said simply, in a strangely serious voice. They were alone in the large, snow-covered walkway. “I’ve seen Thestrals since I was eight, and my father has personally tried to kill you and your housemates at least once. You aren’t allowed to be my type.”

“Allowed? What does your father have to do with the type of girl that you like?” she asked. This conversation had taken a decidedly dark turn.

“Everything.”

"I have to admit I'd be a bit disgusted with you if you actually believed that," she said.

"The fact that you doubt it makes me question your sanity," he said, but the joking tone undercut his words.

"I have to admit that cute, honest, and smart are traits that I find attractive," Ginny said. "So I'd like to go to Hogsmeade with you."

"You think I'm cute?" he asked arrogantly.

"Of course." Someday, she would have to undergo a self examination to determine exactly why she was so comfortable with someone like Theo knowing she found him attractive while letting Harry know that caused her pangs of anxiety. "But I'd like to set a condition."

"I thought only Slytherins made conditions."

Ginny shook her head. "Tell me something about Professor Wrightman and why you dislike Devon's parents."

"Those are two conditions," he said. They stood outside the castle doors.

"Well then, I set two conditions," she said, waving a hand dismissively. "Now you have to decide if it's worth it."

He shifted his weight and asked, "Why do you assume I know anything about the people you mentioned?"

"Because Devon mentioned you not liking her parents, and the Wrightmans are an old Slytherin family like the Notts." The sun was low enough that it was glaring right into Ginny's eyes from just above the horizon.

"You're lucky I think this will be so amusing," he said, conjuring a ball of warm fire and leading Ginny to a little courtyard off the main entrance where three stone benches ran along the wall. "Who do you want to hear about first?"

“Devon’s parents,” Ginny said, sitting down gingerly with her aching leg muscles.

“First, I do not dislike them,” he said, joining her and placing the fire between them. “I don’t like when they visit because Mrs. Pearce gossips with my mother. Thanks to you, I’ll control what she’s going to say, and I enjoy wreaking purposeful havoc.”

“Pleasant.”

“As for Professor Wrightman, what do you want to know?”

“I don’t know. Anything. I’m curious.” Ever since Betsy and Kerney had told her about the things Wrightman was doing in the castle, she hadn’t been able to stop wondering about the woman.

“She and my mother were in the same year at Hogwarts,” Theo began.

Ginny’s mouth fell open. “They were? They must have known each other well, then.”

“Hardly. They were in different houses.”

“But I thought Wrightman was in Slytherin.”

“She was. My mother was a Gryffindor.”

At this, Ginny’s grinned a wide grin. “Was she now?”

“Stop looking so smug. She was hardly a pillar of pride there.”

“But—” Ginny cut herself off as a bunch of information clicked together in her head. “If your mum was a Gryffindor, she was in the same year as Andy’s mum and Harry’s. Andy McGrath and Harry Potter. Have you ever talked to them about—”

“No,” he said curtly. The anger welling inside his eyes surprised her. Did he live with these feelings simmering just under the surface?

“Sorry. Didn’t know it was taboo. I just thought it was interesting that they were all in the same year.”

“Most from that year are dead and, as my father likes to say, best not discussed,” Theo said.

“And Wrightman?” Ginny asked, trying to steer the conversation back to neutral territory.

“She was supposed to marry Sirius Black before he renounced his family and the Wrightmans revoked the arrangement,” Theo said.

Ginny’s expression reflected the gravity of recalling the circumstances.

“Marriage contracts normally pass to the younger siblings,” Ginny said, not really sure where she had learned this information. Probably from a trashy novel she had read when she was younger.

Theo nodded. “Yes, but Sirius Black was one of the most powerful and influential wizards of his generation, even before he left Hogwarts, which is why he was linked with Gertrude Wrightman, the sole heir of her family. It would have been an insult for her to marry Sirius’s less worthy brother.”

“She could have married Sirius anyway and kept her name and title. It wouldn’t have mattered,” Ginny said.

“Her parents made her choice.” He shrugged.

“That’s not right.”

“Not all of us have enough fortitude to ruin our families in the name of our beliefs,” Theo said.

Ginny was so frustrated. “But she gave up her own happiness.”

“You don’t know that.” Ginny watched Theo as he said this, wondering what he truly thought of their professor and her decisions

regarding marriage, Sirius, and her family. "But she maintained her power in society. Even more in France now."

This was news to Ginny. "France?"

"Yes. She married a French nobleman and keeps his estate as her primary residency even though she has worked for the Ministry for a dozen years now." This was turning out to be quite the information session.

"She works for the Ministry, but she lives in France?" That was a two-floo connection unless she had a special permit. Hardly a fun daily commute.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because her position with the Ministry isn't very visible to the public, and living across the Channel only helps her to maintain a discreet and relatively quiet life. Though her husband is active in French magical affairs, and she's involved in various committees here."

"What does she do for the Ministry?" Ginny asked, but the answer came to her even as Theo said it.

"She's an Unspeakable."

Ginny's entire image of her professor was twisted; Wrightman held her dream job.

"How do you know all this?" she asked him. "And don't give me some dodgy answer that it's your job to know. I mean it, how did you come across information like this?"

"My grandparents told me," he replied simply. At Ginny's expectant look he elaborated. "They are the heads of the Caldwell family, and have known Professor Wrightman since she was born."

"Oh."

"I think," he said, "that I have more than earned our date."

"Yes," she agreed. "Thanks for all the information."

He nodded toward the door. "Go see Pomfrey now, would you? You look disgusting."

She laughed and nodded, heading inside.

"Oh, and Ginny?" he called, making her turn. "Don't think I didn't notice that you didn't look surprised to hear Sirius Black's name, nor that you referred to him as Sirius."

She froze, but decided to play it off. "Next time you blackmail me, you have ready made questions then."

The party celebrating Gryffindor's win seemed to double in size every hour. Ginny, with purple paste on her black eye courtesy of Madam Pomfrey, was instantly swept up in the fun, handed a drink, and shoved toward the dance floor.

Duncan Moran grabbed her hand unexpectedly. "Dance?"

She shook her head with a polite smile, holding up her bandaged wrist to point to her face. "I'm too sore to dance."

"You're killing the fun, Ginny!" Colin called out as he swept past with Artemis, who twirled around to pass Ginny her drink.

Ginny laughed and took the cup as she watched her friends spin between other couples, making up for their lack of coordination with a lot of enthusiasm.

"Hey there," Andy said, stepping up next to her as Duncan slinked off. "Congrats on the victory."

Ginny beamed. "Thanks."

"Took you a while to get here, huh?" Andy said lightly.



“Yeah,” Ginny said. “I had to write a couple of letters.”

In fact, after going to Pomfrey for a salve for her eye, Ginny sent letters to Bill, Remus, and Mad-Eye Moody asking some questions. The last one was a gamble: he would either think Ginny was impertinent or being very vigilant. She was counting on it being the latter.

“That’s a boring way to celebrate a victory,” Andy said.

She waved it off, taking a sip of the drink. “Shouldn’t you be dancing with Nadine?”

“Shouldn’t you look happy?”

“I am,” she said, looking up at him. “I’m just a little preoccupied as well.”

The students were becoming progressively more exuberant, and a few bumped into Andy and Ginny, patting her on the back and telling her what a good game it she had played. Naomi Ryan, the oldest of the Ryan girls and the current holder of the Best Legs title, stood on the other end of the room, talking to an older boy that Ginny didn’t know well, but her eyes kept glancing at Andy and Ginny.

“I think Nadine’s sister is worried about our conversation,” Ginny said, nodding toward the seventh year.

“No,” Andy said with a smile. “She’s just silently begging me to save her from Tony. He wants to ask her out, and she would like to avoid that.”

Oh. “Are you going to help her?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “I owe her a favor or ten.”

“Good luck with that,” Ginny said.

“Thanks.” Andy didn’t walk directly over to Naomi; instead, he stopped just a little ways from Ginny where little third years Nadia Ryan and Stevie McGrath were covertly charming dancing students’ shoelaces together. Andy had a brief conversation before a grin broke out across Nadia’s face as she took Andy’s butterbeer glass and began talking quite loudly and stumbling with exaggeration.

Andy only had to walk over to Naomi and point out her sister—who was overselling her fake drunkenness—, and she was free to politely leave Tony’s company. Ginny saw the seventh year mouth ‘Thank you’ to Andy as they made their way through the room.

“Having a good time?” asked a voice so close to Ginny that she nearly jumped, only to register that it was Harry. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

Calming her beating heart, Ginny waved him off. “It’s fine.”

“How did you escape Pomfrey with just that?” Harry asked, nodding at her eye. The purple goo had hardened and was probably mostly clear now, the healing in effect.

“I told her you were probably coming in soon, and she went into a frenzy of preparations, giving me the chance to slip away,” she said, motioning with two fingers as if they were little legs running.

He leaned against the back of the couch. “Clever.”

“Thanks.” She smiled. “So how does it feel to be the toast of the house, Captain Potter?”

“Good. Well, until I start thinking about the next match,” he said with a wry smile.

“Then don’t think about that yet.” She finished her drink. “Focus on the brilliance of today.”

“I’ll try.” He brushed the knuckles on his right hand against her cheek, and she felt like she was going to explode. It took a few full seconds

for her to come back to her senses and see that Harry's eyes were slightly glazed. Her heart plummeted.

"You're drunk."

"I'm sixteen. I'm allowed to be drunk." How sad that his instant reaction was defensive.

"I know," Ginny said easily.

"No one else does," Harry said, resting both his hands on the couch back. "They all think I should be doing more important things. Hero things."

How much had he had to drink? "They don't think that, Harry."

"Yes, they do. Most of them," he said, shaking his head. "I do, too. I wonder if I should bother with Quidditch at all. I could use the extra time for research."

Ginny was violently reminded of her conversation with Katie after their training session. "You can't give up the things you love because you have other responsibilities."

"I have to," Harry said quietly, watching her so closely that she ached inside. "It's like first year, when we were going after the stone. Hermione was yelling about points and being expelled, and it drove me spare because none of that mattered. Not really. Points and house pride and Hogwarts and even Quidditch... I love them, but they're not what matters."

"Just because something makes you happy doesn't mean it's not worth your time," Ginny said. "Actually, it's the opposite. With as many responsibilities as you've been given by our peers and the media, you should cling to the normal, happy things."

Harry didn't look very convinced in their secluded spot. "It's up to me to stop him. I told you that."

Oh yes, the stupid prophecy.

“Believe it or not, Harry. My favorite thing about you is how human you are,” Ginny said entreatingly. “Chosen One, Boy-Who-Lived, I don’t know who that is. I just know Harry, Quidditch captain, friend, and generally average student, who I am ridiculously happy to see in the corridor between classes.”

Either the alcohol or her words had an effect, because Harry remained silent as he watched her for a few more seconds. And if it felt like he might have kissed her, Ginny made herself suppress the hope because Jack Sloper had barreled over to them, closely followed by Ron and Hermione in their capacity as Prefects, trying to reign in the younger years and send them to bed. But for those few seconds when it was just Harry and Ginny, she felt like the world was shifting under them somehow. And she was glad.

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Author's Note: Sorry for the three week wait between chapters. Family drama made this chapter difficult to focus on. It occurred to me that I haven't mentioned Holden's name in a while. This is her story, after all, and I would not be writing anything at all if she hadn't written all these chapters and characters. So thank you, Holden, for that and for putting up with my revisions. Also, I know there were mixed (mostly poor) reactions to the changes to this Theo. All I can say is sorry, but that's how he's going to be in this story. I hope that this chapter made him as appealing as the last incarnation, but if not, that's okay. As a result of those reactions, however, I was also worried about Baron. I think I kept him more or less the same, but feel free to let me know what you all think! – Miranda

## CHAPTER 12

### Coming to a Head

Ginny and Theo met up in front of the Great Hall on the day of the Hogsmeade trip just after breakfast. It was late March and the weather looked like it was growing warmer, but Hogwarts students knew not to count on that. Hogsmeade weekends attracted the very worst weather.

"That cloak looks flimsy. Is it waterproof?" Theo asked, looking over Ginny's hand-me-down from Percy.

"It's traditional to start a date by complimenting the girl, not insulting her clothing," Ginny said dryly.

"You know you're beautiful," Theo said, placing a hand on the small of her back to lead her toward the main doors. "I hardly need to say that."

Pleased, Ginny smiled. "It's nice to hear."

He smirked in a way that let Ginny know he was about to say something obnoxious. "If it rains and your cloak isn't waterproof, I'm sure you'll have plenty of admirers willing to say something nice to you."

"I hate you," she groused.

He leaned close to her and breathed, "No, you don't."

Shivering, tensing, and trying to hide her response all at the same time, Ginny let him brush by her to open the door and lead her outside and down the long path to Hogsmeade.

"I'm thinking of buying a chimera as a pet," he said quite out of the blue.

Ginny nearly laughed. After five sessions working with him in the dungeons, she had learned that Theo liked to start conversation with

whatever he was thinking about. It ensured that they never had a dull or repetitive conversation. She secretly really wanted to introduce him to Luna and see what they made of one another.

“You couldn’t bring it to Hogwarts,” she pointed out.

He waved that off as he tightened his scarf and held out his elbow. “I could convince Hagrid that it would be exciting, I’m sure.”

Looping her arm through his, she asked, “What if it ate one of the house-elves?”

“I would replace it.”

“What if it ate a first year?”

“That would be more difficult to replace,” he allowed, tucking his gloved hands into his pockets as she laughed. Over the course of their sessions together and growing friendship outside the dungeons, Ginny had come to realize why he kept the fires so hot while making potions: Theo had a very low tolerance for cold.

“We’re already being stared at,” Ginny said, nodding at a Hufflepuff couple that tried and failed to look casual as they saw a Gryffindor—a Weasley, in fact—on a date with a Slytherin—one of the sons of a Death Eater.

“They watch us because they don’t understand, which gives us power,” Theo said, lips curling.

Ginny laughed again. “Is that why you always look like you feel superior to everyone else? Because you know they’re wondering about you?”

“Yes,” he said, looking entirely too pleased with himself. Ginny decided to throw a snowball at him before the end of the day.

“I’ll have you know that I didn’t even notice you until this year; so not everyone thinks about you all the time,” she said.

His silky gaze slid across her face. “You think about me now, though, don’t you?”

Caught. “On occasion.”

He nodded at the road before them. “And you’re going to have a better time here with me than you did with Duncan Moran.”

“Probably,” she agreed, thinking that it was already true.

“Then I don’t think I’ll care what you failed to notice for five years.”

Ginny found that she couldn’t stop smiling all morning. Theo appeared to be exceedingly—albeit quietly—pleased with himself. They walked and chatted about a number of things, including Potions, various members of Theo’s House, Quidditch, and their families.

Unlike her date with Duncan, Ginny found that their conversation made the trip pass by quite rapidly. Before she knew it, they were approaching Quality Quidditch Supplies, where Theo noticed her pretending not to look at the window display. Smirking pleasantly, he asked her if she would like to browse, and once she admitted that she did, opened the door to let them inside.

They spent quite a while in the shop, and Ginny found that although he did not play himself, Theo was very knowledgeable and very interested in the game. His team was the Kenmare Kestrels, which, while not the Chudley Cannons, was evidence that he was a true fan and not a bandwagon-type.

“They’re horrible,” Ginny said, pulling a warm Kestrels hat on her head.

Theo snatched it off and handed her a different one. “Be warned, I’m prepared to hex those who insult my team. My family estate is located in County Kerry in southwestern Ireland, where Kenmare is the local team and the natural object of my undying allegiance.”

Now sporting a Kenmare hat, gloves, scarf, and wand-warmer, Ginny grinned. “Could I pass as a fan?”

He smiled. "No."

She laughed as she took the paraphernalia off. "Just as well. I'm a Holyhead Harpies fan myself."

"Just like every other girl," he said, shaking his head. "Have you ever been to a game?"

"I went to the World Cup twice, including this last one with Bulgaria," Ginny said. There were few things that Ginny enjoyed talking about more than Quidditch.

"Against Ireland? That was a great one. My parents took me, but my dad sent us home early," he said, eyes drifting and darkening for a moment before clearing. "Anyway, Quidditch is something my mother and I always did together."

"Really? My mum can't tell the difference between a Seeker and a Snitch," Ginny said, trying not to think of the reason why Theo's dad would have sent him home early from the World Cup. Could Mr. Nott have been among those torturing the Muggles that night?

"My mother bought season tickets each year and took me every Saturday to watch the Kestrels," he said as they continued through the rows of shelves that housed dormant Bludgers. "We haven't done that in a while, though."

His broken family was one of the more secretive things about Theo, as he didn't like talking about his parents or elaborating on details, only hinting with deep loathing in his voice.

"What was the last match you went to?" she asked.

His face lit up as he held up a platinum snitch. "My Uncle Chad's closest friend is a Ballycastle Bats fanatic. He drags me to their matches every Christmas. Drags the entire family, in fact, including your--"

"My what?" Ginny asked after he cut himself off.



“Your housemates, a few of them,” Theo said after a slight hesitation, replacing the snitch. “Though he keeps trying, Will never could trick me into caring about his team like he did them.”

“Do I know the housemates?” Ginny asked, running her hands along the shelf.

“Yes,” Theo said.

As they continued to stop and check out many of the items in the store, the first two games of Gryffindor’s season, as well as the approaching match with Ravenclaw, came up several times.

While he certainly had his own opinions, Ginny was pleased to discover that he wasn’t like Ron and Michael Corner in the sense that he could respect someone else’s views without necessarily agreeing. Quidditch discussions with Ron (and with Michael, when she was still dating him) always deteriorated into angry shouting matches because those two boys always had to be right.

When Ginny had seen her fill, they left the store and walked to the Three Broomsticks on Theo’s suggestion. Ginny was thrilled that he didn’t even glance in the direction of Madam Puddifoot’s.

Ginny volunteered to order them butterbeers from the bar, while Theo agreed to find them a booth. Both the fact that he was a relatively mysterious Slytherin sixth-year and the fact that he had walked into the pub with Ginny Weasley in full view of all the student patrons made Theo’s task significantly easier than it would have been for the average student. Ginny matched Rosmerta’s smile as she approached the bar.

“So, who are you with this time?” Rosmerta inquired, indirectly alluding to Ginny’s last date with Duncan Moran.

Ginny smiled this time rather than rolling her eyes. “Theo Nott.”

Madam Rosmerta's eyebrows lifted slightly in recognition of Ginny's good humor. "Well you certainly seem better pleased with him than the last bloke you brought in here."

Ginny's expression displayed her agreement and relief. "Definitely. It probably helps that I actually like him."

Rosmerta laughed. "That tends to make dating a bit easier."

Ginny's face seemed glued into a smile. Rosmerta lifted their drinks to the counter.

"Here you go, and I'll be over to take your lunch orders as soon as it dies down a bit," Rosmerta said.

"Thanks," Ginny said before weaving her way through the crowd toward Theo at a table in the corner. This action was violently disrupted by someone knocking into Ginny as she turned, thoroughly soaking her bare arm in butterbeer.

"Neville!" a familiar voice chastised. Ginny looked up to see a horrified Neville and, behind him, a concerned-looking Harry. Luna was standing somewhat to the side, but was obviously with their party.

"Sorry, Ginny!" Neville cried, picking up the mug that had fallen to the floor when they collided. Luna reached her wand around to cast a drying spell on Ginny's wet arm.

"Thanks," Ginny said before she turned to Neville with a small smile. "No harm done, Neville. I'll just get new drinks."

"No, no. I'll get them," Neville said, rushing off to the bar before she could protest.

"Neville likes to be helpful," Luna said agreeably. Her eyes lit up. "I'm going to have another drink, too."

The blonde ran off to the bar, making Harry laugh. "That'll be her fourth drink."

Ginny smiled. "Is Luna drunk?"

"I don't know," Harry said, shaking his head. "I can't tell the difference."

Laughing, Ginny smiled up at him.

His grin faltered as he glanced over her head. "Sorry about this, by the way."

"What?"

"Neville spilling your drinks and everything," he said.

"Why? Did you trip him?" she asked, bemused.

He smiled. "No, but I keep interrupting your dates." He paused. "That is what you're doing with Theo Nott, right?"

"Yes," Ginny said, surprised to realize she hadn't mentioned it to Harry.

He held her gaze for a moment and then looked to his two companions. Neville was turning from the bar with new drinks for Ginny, and Luna was speaking to him as he did so. When Ginny turned to thank Neville for fetching the butterbeers, she thought she saw Harry sneak a glance at Theo again.

Ginny took the heavy drinks carefully. "Thanks Neville, you didn't have to do that."

Neville smiled sheepishly. "I knocked yours over."

"Well, thanks again. I'll see you guys later," Ginny said, nodding at all three, though Harry maintained the majority of her attention.

"See you later, Ginny. Have... Have a nice time today."

Ginny smiled, though not without a considerable degree of self-consciousness.

"Thanks, Harry. I'll see you at dinner." And with that, she took the drinks back to the table where Theo was waiting for her. Ginny hoped Luna wouldn't decide to take matters into her own hands on the subject of her and Harry, and any feelings they may or may not have for each other. When she arrived at the booth Theo had commandeered, the young man looked very much like he had been observing the entire exchange from across the room. His first words to her were a bit startling.

"Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood were the other two students who went with you to the Department of Mysteries last year, weren't they?" he asked.

Ginny blinked.

"Ah... yes, they were. Do people not know that?" she wondered aloud. She had thought that between gossip at Hogwarts and the Daily Prophet, most of the wizard families had a fairly good idea of what had gone on at the Ministry of Magic the previous June. Perhaps she had been mistaken.

"No, most people don't. The Prophet only said that five students were involved with Harry Potter in the events that occurred in the Department of Mysteries. Everyone knows that you, your brother, and Hermione Granger were three of the others, but I didn't know that Longbottom and Lovegood were the final two. I wouldn't have guessed them."

Ginny knew that both Luna's and Neville's families knew about the incident. "They're good fighters."

Theo peered around her to where Luna was setting down her now-empty butterbeer. "I could believe that. At the very least, Lovegood's attacks would be unpredictable."

Ginny grinned. "Exactly."

Luna and Neville were talking happily with Harry across the bar.

"I had the impression that Harry isn't particularly pleased that you accepted a date with me," he commented, in the way one might suggest that it might rain later. His manner disarmed Ginny momentarily, since she was still not quite used to such directness in the discussion of awkward subjects.

"He didn't seem to mind," she said. "Told me to have a good time today, though he wasn't exactly enthusiastic."

"Hm." Theo took a sip of his drink. "He has never paid me much attention during the nearly six years we've been in school together, but ever since you and I started talking, he has become much more attentive of my existence."

"He can be very protective of my family," Ginny said, not at all convincingly. She didn't particularly care how convincing she was, though, since she hardly knew how she wanted to respond in the first place.

"I don't think that's where his particular concern stems from, in your case," Theo replied, with no small amount of insinuation in his tone. Ginny was a bit tired of waiting for Theo to come to his point.

"Well, I've never been particularly adept at guessing Harry's thoughts," Ginny said, not wanting to talk about this anymore.

"Hm," Theo murmured again, returning his full attention to Ginny. "Perhaps it wasn't Baron who I should consider a rival."

"A rival for what?" Ginny asked.

"You," he said, his dark eyes locked on hers.

Despite desperately wanting to change the subject and return to lighter conversation, Ginny was at a loss for how to facilitate such return to casual discussion.

Fortunately, Madam Rosmerta arrived at their table right then to take their lunch orders. Ginny and Theo thought about and looked at

nothing but each other until late afternoon when they began the trip back to Hogwarts.

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Ginny and Theo talked about common Hogwarts legends—the Great Weasley escape among others—as they walked up a small hill on the outskirts of the wizarding village. The turrets of the castle and the Quidditch rings came into sight as they overtook the mound, but any musings they might have shared with each other were cut off by a particularly urgent yell.

“Ginny, look out!” cried a boy behind them

By pure instinct, Ginny dropped to the ground, eyes searching out danger and arms groping for Theo, who she had tugged down with her. She heard footsteps pounding and glanced up to see Neville and Harry rushing to meet . . .

Dementors.

Six of them. Coming out of the small patch of woods that ran up one side of the small hill. Harry kept glancing toward her, and Ginny thought that if he kept it up, he might get himself killed—or, seeing as they were dealing with Dementors, much, much worse. As she looked down at Theo, she caught Luna’s slight form running in a direction that Harry pointed down the road.

Ginny glanced at her somewhat startled date. “Can you conjure a Patronus?”

Theo nodded briskly, his face all business. “A bear.”

“Then let’s go help them,” she said, rising and pulling him up with her.

Just as she did, Theo pulled her back down and rolled them over. Simultaneously, Ginny felt the temperature plummet. There were more of them. Without thinking, Ginny hugged Theo tightly and whispered the Apparation spell, whisking them across the mound just as she could feel the coldness creeping in again. They reappeared

about fifteen feet behind Harry and Neville, and Ginny was almost immediately up again.

“Expecto Patronum!” Theo’s voice rang out, followed quickly by Ginny’s own.

Only, where Theo’s brown bear came wooshing out of the end of his wand to join Harry’s and Neville’s, Ginny’s Patronus sputtered. Need a happy memory, she chastised herself. What was the one she’d used with Remus? Oh yes, the Chamber of Secrets. Suddenly images of giant serpents, mysterious older boys, and clumsy saviors filled her head, and as she began to re-live the joy of seeing Harry arrive to save her in her mind, she heard faint shouts around her. Her head cleared briefly, reminding her of the danger at hand, and she lifted her wand.

“Expecto Patronum!” she thundered, and her stag came galloping forth toward the ten Dementors, ramming into them with its antlers.

The moment Ginny’s Patronus came into sight of the other three, however, all of the boys’ Patronuses faltered, as they turned to her with looks of surprise.

“Focus on the Dementors!” she snapped, pouring more energy into her lone Patronus. It was fighting hard, but losing.

Harry snapped back into Boy-Who-Lived mode, straightening and focusing on the threat at hand. He cast the Charm again, quickly and perfectly conjuring a stag nearly twice as big and more than twice as bright as the other charms. Neville and Theo followed suit.

“Neville,” Harry called. “Take the left. They’re trying to split off. Theo, the middle. Ginny block the exit. I’ll try to move them back toward the forest.”

Harry’s Patronus gored Dementor after Dementor, drawing their attention away from the others, and allowing the other four teenagers to maneuver according to the plan. Yet the Dementors kept coming, more and more numerous.

A scream went up behind them and Ginny turned to see students streaming in the opposite direction, pouring into the buildings along the road.

“Not good,” Ginny muttered, turning back to the threats.

“We need to tell the professors!” Harry shouted over the noise of scrambling students and creeping Dementors. “Nott, can you Apparate?”

“No!” the answer came back, and Ginny heard her name next. The wind seemed to have picked up significantly.

“Ginny, Apparate to the castle gates and find help! We’ll try to hold them back and follow!” Harry glanced at Neville. “Go!”

It was becoming downright blustery now—not to mention cold—and the wind was almost completely swallowing their words. Ginny didn’t want to leave, and Theo caught her eye.

“You’re more useful going than staying!” he said.

She wouldn’t waste time arguing. “Apparatus!”

Before she could blink, Ginny landed with a significant thud at the gates to the Hogwarts ground and rushed down the path, sprinting as quickly as possible in the light snow and cold wind. When she had made it halfway to the large doors of the castle, she heard a loud crack, and turned to see Harry, Theo, and Neville tumble out of thin air at the foot of the gate.

Ginny screamed as she noticed that one of the Dementors had gotten through the Apparation with them, and still had a firm grip on Theo’s ankle. This sent Ginny running back toward the gate, but not before Ginny sent a strong Reductor Curse toward the large heavy doors of the school. One of the doors exploded, and Ginny hoped it would attract the attention of a faculty member in time to help them.

The thought briefly crossed her mind that she could be severely punished for damaging school property.



Harry grabbed the scaly, dead hand of the Dementor and yanked it away from the Slytherin, twisting just enough to cast another Patronus right into its hooded face. But as Ginny looked up to see whether any professors were coming to help them, she noticed that the several Dementors they had left on the other side of the hill were fast approaching. There was no Apparating on Hogwarts grounds, but she had to hope that there would be some kind of protection against the dark creatures inside the gates of the school.

“Recast the charms!” Harry yelled, but three silvery Patronuses were already charging forward, and Ginny recognized them instantly: Ron’s terrier, Hermione’s otter, and Luna’s unicorn. Luna must have gone to find them.

Yet their Patronuses only managed to push the Dementors away from the forest, directing them toward the lake while the three students raced toward Ginny’s group.

“Run!” Ginny yelled, yanking on the nearest arms she could reach, which turned out to be Luna’s. She took off with the others fast on her heels when Dumbledore and Professor Wrightman appeared in the area around the damaged door. If she hadn’t been panting from an outright sprint, Ginny would have sighed with relief.

Professor Wrightman spotted them first, pointing and drawing Dumbledore’s attention. At nearly the same time, Ginny felt someone tug on her shirt, and she stopped running. It was Neville, and Ginny turned with the others to see Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick emerge from the side of the castle, casting Patronus Charms to give the teenagers some cover. The students shared a look and ran the rest of the way to the headmaster.

“There are more at the gate,” Ginny called out.

“Get them inside,” Dumbledore order, brandishing his wand. A silver phoenix roared to life, and the school wards almost physically pressed down on the students, offering protection.

Wrightman did as ordered, herding the students inside and magically fixing the door Ginny's hex had destroyed.

"Move away from the windows," she said, but not before the students saw Dumbledore, alone on the other side.

Wait. No. He wasn't alone. McGonagall and Flitwick soon joined him in his march toward the three smaller figures still fighting the Dementors, a boy with dark black hair and billowing robes beside his two best mates.

Disbelieving, Ginny looked around the group as if to spot the Trio, only to realize that they really were outside. They were always fighting.

"Professor!" Ginny cried out, pointing. But the scene unfolded before Wrightman even had a chance to reply. Dementors floated nearer, only to fall back in the face of Harry's angry Patronus, and Dumbledore marched toward them. The old man was 150, but when he raised his wand and stood beside Harry, Hermione, and Ron, their Patronuses rose up together, and the Dementors fell back as if physically pushed.

Then three of the Dementors' cloaks crumpled to the ground as if they were suddenly empty, and the rest tried to flee. But Dumbledore caught them all, one at a time.

"What's he doing?" Ginny asked.

"Dementors can't be killed," Neville said.

"Everything can die, if enough effort is expended," Wrightman said coldly. The clean up was swift, and the day still cold.

"That's insane," Theo said in wonder, just loud enough that Ginny could hear, watching Harry walk back amongst the professors and his friends, strong and solid and yet still the sixteen year old boy who sat so awkwardly at her mother's table while piles of food were heaped on his plate. "They're his greatest fear."

“What?” she asked.

“During the Tri-wizard tournament, Potter faced a Boggart and it became a Dementor.” Theo looked down at Ginny. “Malfoy laughed about it, but after everything with Cedric happened, he forgot to tease Potter.”

“So?”

“So,” Theo said, “he grabbed the thing he feared most to save me.”

His tone spoke volumes, for what sort of person faces their greatest fear willingly when they could have run? What sort of person reaches out and grabs it to save someone they barely know and don't particularly like?

They were eventually led up to Dumbledore's office, where Luna, Neville, Ginny, and Theo waited in large red chairs for the headmaster to meet them. It took a few minutes; he no doubt had to make a few calls to the Aurors (and probably the Order), but he, Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked in together, eating chocolate frogs.

“I still say that was pathetic,” Ron was saying to Harry. “You handled a hundred on your own when you were thirteen, and ten were difficult this time?” Ron shook his head. “You've lost your edge.”

“Ron!” Hermione scolded. “That was a different situation.”

“A hundred?” Theo repeated, looking curiously at Harry.

“That's an exaggeration,” Harry said quickly, looking at the rest of the people in the room as Dumbledore drew up a few more chairs for him and his friends to use.

“Granger doesn't exaggerate,” Theo said, making Ginny look at him curiously. Everyone in Gryffindor knew what a fastidious person Hermione was, but did the whole school respect that?

“Was anyone injured?” Luna asked politely.

“No. The students have been escorted back from Hogsmeade,” Dumbledore began, handing the non-trio students more chocolate before lowering himself into his chair.

“The one thing I don’t understand, professor, is the purpose,” Hermione said, color coming back to her face as she broke off another piece of chocolate to munch on. “Was this an attack or a distraction? It wasn’t a full-scale invasion, clearly.”

“Clearly,” Theo muttered.

The headmaster shook his head. “Dementors do not act according to larger plans. They merely hunt for sources of food. They were freed from Azkaban in the hopes that they might do what they did today: create panic.”

Well, they had certainly done that, Ginny thought, remembering the cold washing over her and the faint echoing drips of the Chamber she heard when they drew near. She took a vicious bite of the chocolate, glad for the warmth. It was strange to think that the worst memory she had—the one that the Dementors made her feel most—was also part of the memory that made her able to cast the Patronus, even if they felt like completely distinct moments in her life.

“Thank you for your warning,” Dumbledore said to Ginny, surprising her.

“Sorry about the door,” Ginny said, though she wasn’t really. It had gotten their attention after all, and that was what matter. What else could she have done? Sent an owl? “But Professor Wrightman seems to have fix it.”

“It has been repaired and reset,” Dumbledore said.

They spent a half-hour in Dumbledore’s office answering questions and having Madam Pomfrey fuss over the lot of them. Theo sent her a quelling look when she asked if he had had another bad reaction to the Dementors, which made Ginny wonder exactly what his worst memory was.

Harry held up his chocolate defensively when the matron came over, as if to prove that she couldn't possibly find anything wrong with him.

Professor McGonagall returned at that point, to report that the escaped Dementors had been contained by Aurors and were presently being transported away from Hogsmeade. All the students were accounted for as well, which was great. This news allowed Ginny a small bit of relief, though she was hardly confident that either the Aurors or the people of Britain would be particularly safe.

"Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley, we're having an emergency Prefects meeting as soon as you leave here."

They nodded their understanding, but when McGonagall and Flitwick departed, a silence descended over the students and faculty members.

After a moment, the headmaster spoke.

"Your quick thinking probably saved lives today," Dumbledore said, looking each of them in the eye. "You did honor to this school."

It was almost predictable that Harry's reaction to such praise was to slouch back in his chair and look at the sleeping portraits on the wall as if uncomfortable.

"You're not going to tell our parents, are you?" Theo asked.

Dumbledore paused. "That responsibility falls to your head of house."

Theo relaxed immediately, but he was the only one. Well, Luna looked perfectly fine with the news, but Ron and Ginny shared a look of dread. They would have to work together to create a version of the truth to send to Mrs. Weasley in a hurry that would stave off any Howlers. Hermione was pinching her fingers together worriedly, and Neville looked a cross between anxious and resolute.

Harry didn't look like he cared.

Ginny wondered briefly what it would be like to have no family at all, but the thought scared her and she quickly pushed it away.

They were dismissed soon after and sent back to their dormitories with the promise of twenty points to each of them.

“Imagine, Slytherin house rewarded for a student defending the school,” Theo said as they left the gargoyle statue’s corridor.

“It’s happened before,” Harry said, shrugging lightly while Ron and Hermione shared a look that sent a thrill of irritation through Ginny because she knew that they were thinking of Tom Riddle’s Special Services award, not Sylvia Dawlish’s valiant stand against the goblins or Emmet St. Thomas’s medallion for bravery. For all that Tom said he wanted to reclaim Slytherin’s glory, he had done more to hurt that house’s reputation than anyone in recent memory.

“I’m going to check on the greenhouses. Dementors effect some of the plants I’m growing,” Neville said. The bottom of his cloak was thoroughly soaked. “Then I’ll have to write Gran.”

“And I have to write Daddy. He worries when I’m involved in large fights,” Luna said casually, stepping lightly down the corridor toward the owlery, though she didn’t have a single piece of parchment on her.

“And we have to go to that emergency prefect meeting,” Hermione said, looking anxiously between Ron and Harry as if the thought of leaving Harry was uncomfortable.

“Go ahead. I’ll be fine,” Harry assured them, though Hermione didn’t look convinced. Luckily, Ron dragged her off quickly. Their friendship was one of those things that Ginny tried really, really hard not to envy. She had good friends like Andy and Kerney, but sometimes watching the way Harry spoke to Ron and Hermione—the trust and understand implicit in half-finished sentences and simple looks—made Ginny ache inside.

Watching Ron and Hermione walk away, Theo sardonically said, “So this what it feel like to be a Gryffindor.”

“Luna’s a Ravenclaw,” Ginny pointed out.

“Ah. So this is what it feels like to hang out with a bunch of do gooders from two houses who have no sense of self preservation,” Theo amended, his Slytherin scarf somehow perfectly folded around his neck despite the fighting and running.

Ginny shrugged. “Well, this isn’t exactly normal.”

Theo raised an eyebrow.

“It isn’t!” she insisted. “Tell him, Harry.”

“Normally Ron and Hermione are with us from the beginning,” Harry said, as if that had anything to do with their discussion. Ginny gave an irritated huff.

“Really helpful, Harry,” she said, rolling her eyes. They were in the middle of an empty corridor. The rest of the students had probably been forced back to their common rooms for a head count.

Harry glanced at Theo, before focusing on Ginny and saying, “So I saw your Patronus at last.”

Ginny stiffened, and noticed Theo paying close attention, though she didn’t dare look at him.

“It was the same as mine,” Harry said rather obviously.

“Yep,” Ginny said, trying to sound as casual as possible with Theo Nott watching her like an experimental potion bubbling over.

“Why didn’t you want me to know that?” Harry just had to ask. He was brave enough to face a dozen Dementors alone, strong enough to cast a Patronus by thirteen, and smart enough to qualify for most of the hardest classes offered at Hogwarts, but this eluded him. It was almost pathetic, really.

“Just seemed a bit creepy, I guess,” Ginny said, lifting a shoulder. “Didn’t want you to be freaked out.”

“Why would I be freaked out?” He was honestly confused, which just made Ginny feel worse. If he were raised in the wizarding world like Theo—who had relaxed on the heels of his feet and crossed his arms over his chest—Harry would have understood how stupid that question was.

“I don’t know,” Ginny said, trying not to lie, but really not wanting to explain the myths and rumors about identical Patronuses to Harry Potter.

“It worked to scare off the Dementors,” Theo said, smirking at her tense and uncomfortable situation. “Though I’d like to know why you know how to Apparate at fifteen.”

“I’ve been studying a lot this year,” Ginny said, remembering the frustrating practice sessions at Spinner’s End and then in the Room of Requirement that she had endured.

“Well, it was convenient,” Theo admitted. He looked at Harry. “And I appreciated the side-along Apparation, though it would have been more enjoyable without the Dementor clinging to my leg.”

“I didn’t notice him or I would have done something earlier,” Harry said apologetically, seemingly willing to let the Patronus talk go.

“You probably saved my life by pulling it off me. Thanks.” Theo’s gratitude sounded sincere, clearly not needing Harry to go on about what he should have done.

“So,” Harry said after an awkward moment. “I managed to interrupt another one of your dates, Ginny.”

“Right, because next time Dementors attack, you should just leave me and my date alone,” Ginny said sarcastically, making Harry roll his eyes and shake his head.

“I’ll try,” Harry said with a smile. “I should go back to the common room, though.”



He was clearly trying to let them have some space if they wanted. It was a nice gesture.

"I'll see you there in a bit," Ginny said, trying not to cringe at how uncomfortable she felt.

"Right. Okay. See you, Ginny, Nott." He nodded goodbye at them both before walking down the corridor.

"I was right about seeing him as more of a rival than Baron," Theo said when Harry was out of hearing distance. "And he has no idea what your Patronus means, does he?"

"No." Ginny swallowed, eyes trained on the corner in the distance. "He grew up with Muggles."

"You're in love with him," Theo said, glancing at her out of the corner of his dark, brown eyes that could have been mistaken for black in the dimly lit corridor.

"I don't know about that, but my Patronus certainly seems to think so," Ginny said, sighing. "If you believe all those stories anyway, about identical ones."

Theo turned to face her and put a hand on her chin, his soft fingers running along the side of her jaw. It felt so good that she forgot the words she had meant to say, and leaned in to his touch.

"You don't?" Theo asked, leaning in and kissing her solidly on the mouth, soft lips pressed against hers as his other hand slipped down to her waist to pull her closer. He smirked against her lips and plunged in with control and precision. He was fluid and not sloppy, strong without being overly forceful, and had obviously done this before. Her right hand grabbed a handful of his shirt in the front, and her left attempted to steady herself by holding onto his shoulder.

A few moments later, two things happened—a portrait loudly complained about their 'fraternization' and their lungs began to burn for air. It took Ginny a second to realize where exactly she was.

Theo looked more unkempt than she had ever seen him, and it suited him. His shirt was a little wrinkled, it had come untucked in places, and one of the buttons had come undone. He was still smirking, clearly satisfied with his choices.

"You're more my type than I thought," Theo said.

Ginny's mouth fell open in a cross between incredulity and amusement. "That's the only thing you can say?"

"I enjoy kissing you," he said, leaning forward.

Despite finding his confidence a little attractive, Ginny couldn't help but say, "You just saw that I have a twin Patronus, and you kiss me?"

He shrugged. "I'm a masochist."

"Clearly."

He touched her face softly with his long, pale fingers. "But you're a liar and a masochist. I think that's worse."

She took a step back, trying to clear her head. "I am not."

"What is it about him that made you love him in the first place?" Theo asked without rancor, sounding truly curious. "Is it just that he saves people?"

She gave him a scathing look. "No."

"But he does do that, doesn't he?" Theo asked, shaking his head. "Almost every year since we've been here, saving and saving. It's probably really tiring."

Ginny tried not to smile. "You're making fun of me."

"Can you tell me what it is? Seriously?"

"It's that—" Ginny didn't know how to answer that question.

He smiled. "You don't even know."

It was everything. Ginny liked everything about Harry, to be honest, not just that he saved people. Not even just that he was hot. She liked seeing him across a crowded room, and talking to him about nothing. She liked flying with him and knowing that he was happy. Her feelings about him had been with her for such a long time that she hadn't really analyzed them.

Theo gave her an amused look. "You're in love with a bloke who cares about you, and yet you lie to him about your feelings. In fact, you date the son of a man who tried to kill him, and act like that won't hurt him. You're either a self-destructive masochist, helplessly stupid, or completely terrified and lying about it. Since I know you're not dumb, I'll guess the other two."

"You don't know me," Ginny said automatically.

"But I wish I did," Theo said simply, smiling enigmatically before kissing her once more briefly before taking a few steps backward. "I'll see you Wednesday to work on the potion."

"That's it? That's all you're going to say?"

Theo nodded. "Yes. We're friends now, Ginny."

"Friends?" she repeated.

"Yes. I like the way you work on potions. You're smart, easy to work with, and laugh a lot. I also like kissing you, but I can put that aside to focus on your brain. Maybe your Patronus will change someday," he said with a smile before casually walking down the corridor.

She should probably have followed, should have figured out what this meant. But all she could do was wonder why she couldn't have fallen in love with Theo Nott at eleven.

The Monday after the Hogsmeade attack, Ginny received six owls from family asking about her health. Ron tossed all of his into his bag and left breakfast with Hermione and Harry, the latter of whom had

strangely come down to eat with them instead of his normal break-of-dawn schedule.

Gin,

Mum's freaking out about the Dementors. I told her you were fine, but she wanted me to write. How'd the game against Slytherin go? You never followed up on the letter.

Charlie

Trust Charlie to care about attacks and Quidditch the same amount. The twins sent separate letters that were clearly part of a new secret-letter experiment that required her to lay one on top of the other. It was all so complicated that she sent it back with a note saying that it needed major revision. Ginny answered her parents' letters before lunch, and sent Bill a quick response. He and she had written quite a lot in the last month.

Percy's letter, however, stayed tucked in Ginny's Herbology book all day.

Dear Ginny,

I heard about you and Ron when the Aurors were summoned, and I immediately went to the Burrow to assure Mum that you were both fine and not in the hospital. Travel to Hogwarts was restricted, or she would have been there with you. I'm sorry I couldn't do more to help, but I'm at the Burrow now if they need anything.

Love,

Percy

It took her nearly a minute to get her emotions under control while reading it, and she felt the magic swirling inside her, aching to reach out. Her brother was home. She wasn't entirely sure how she felt about Percy still—it was too complicated an issue to merely write off—but she knew that she felt good knowing her mother had someone with her in addition to her dad.

Tucking the letters into her cloak, Ginny went to Defense with her friends quietly that morning, still processing the weekend's events. It wasn't until she was on her way to her second class of the day that she was pulled into a conversation.

"Did you just find out about the Easter Bunny?" Luna asked sympathetically as they walked to Arithmancy.

"No," Ginny said, so used to Luna's strange trains of thoughts that she rarely asked what the other girl meant. "Percy wrote me a letter."

"That's nice," Luna said. "I love receiving mail."

"Me, too." Ginny smiled, surprised to find how much she had forgiven Percy since they last saw one another over Christmas. Percy was human, after all, and trying to find a way to forgive himself, which was sad, really. And not knowing that his family was there for him was even sadder.

Somehow, Ginny went through all of Monday and Tuesday without running into Theo, even at meals. It was getting to the point where she might have thought he was avoiding her, except that he wasn't the type to do that. He was more the type to revel in uncomfortable situations.

Tuesday night at their weekly Potions review, Ginny arrived a few minutes late and found Devon was already there, but not sitting at a desk like usual with her stacks of neatly lined parchment. Instead, her bag lay at her feet as she leaned against the windowsill, staring at the chalkboard at the front of the well-lit room.

"You okay, Devon?" Ginny asked, letting her own bag slip from her shoulder to the ground near the door.

The brown-haired girl turned her head to look at Ginny over her thin shoulder. She opened her mouth as she nodded, but hesitated, then shook her head. "No, I'm not."

Taking a few steps forward, Ginny asked, "Want to talk about it?"

“No,” Devon said, shaking her head slightly.

Ginny leaned back against the large wood table at the front of the room.

Devon turned completely toward Ginny, arms crossed over her chest, and said, “Theo’s grandfather died last night.”

A wave of empathy hit Ginny as she stood straight up. “Oh no.”

Devon’s eyes were wet and her mouth pressed tightly together, as if guarding against expressing too much emotion.

“You knew him well?” Ginny asked, pushing aside her concern for Theo.

“Yes.” Devon nodded, blinking a few times.

Without thinking about it, Ginny strode across the room and embraced the small girl. It surprised her how cold the room was by the window, and her friend was freezing as she began to quietly cry.

“I’m sorry,” Devon said, taking a step back and swiping at her eyes after a minute.

“Don’t be.”

Devon gave her a watery smile. “You once told me I could cry on your shoulder.”

“Anytime,” Ginny assured her. Both girls sat at nearby chairs.

“I just found out with Theo, and I didn’t want to cry in front of him,” Devon said, hands folded on the desk in front them. “He’s hurting more than I, but he left to go be with his family this morning and I went to class like nothing happened, and all I wanted to do was sit in my room and cry.”

Ginny put her hand on Devon's. It was the most Ginny had ever heard her speak, she thought.

"They're announcing his death tomorrow," Devon said, quietly beginning to cry again. "The Wizengamot is publishing a statement, and Theo's uncle Chad will take his seat next week."

Gretchen Ramsey's name flashed through Ginny's mind as she wondered when the seventh year would begin her duties. Would it be this soon?

"Mr. Caldwell was a good man," Devon said, her hands resting on the wood grooves. "Very good to me."

"Baron and Gretchen told me that once, too," Ginny said, nodding.

"He met Theo and I when we were traveling through Asia together last summer," Devon said with a smile. "Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell Portkeyed in to surprise us, actually, taking us on their boat around the Thai coast."

"That's awesome," Ginny said honestly, thinking of Devon and Theo visiting all the great magical communities in Asia together. What a holiday it must have been. And how close they must be to take such an adventure together.

"It was a great trip," Devon agreed, voice breaking. "I can't believe he's dead."

Ginny wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and they sat together like that for a long time, these unexpected friends.

"I was right, you know," Devon said finally.

Ginny turned her head. "About what?"

"About you not needing to do this for me."

Ginny waved that off. "Need has nothing to do with it. I want to be here with you."

Devon sniffed as she Summoned a handkerchief from her bag.

"Lighten the mood," Devon commanded, brushing her tears away. "Tell me about your date with Theo."

"Are you serious?" Ginny asked.

Devon nodding, wiping away the last of her tears. "I'll cry more later, I promise."

"As if that's what I want," Ginny said with a shake of her head.

Devon slid her hand through her hair, pulling it all behind her shoulders. "How did it go?"

"Didn't Theo tell you?" Ginny asked.

Devon shrugged. "Pieces. He was embarrassed to have fought a Dementor."

That made Ginny smile, and since Devon really seemed to want to know, Ginny quickly summed up their date: good conversation, great time, decent food, and sudden attack that they nonetheless survived.

Devon's eyes had gone to the dark window behind them, where the Hogwarts grounds were covered in bright light of the full moon.

"I'm glad you're alright," Devon said.

"Me too," Ginny said with a smile.

Devon flicked her dark hair out of her face. "But you don't think it's odd at all that you were attacked?"

Well, that was a strange question. "We were in the way. I don't think they were hunting for us."



"That's the thing," Devon said in her clipped, clear diction. "A Longbotoom, Lovegood, Potter, Weasley, and Nott were all attacked indiscriminately."

"And a Granger," Ginny added, thinking of Hermione's shinning otter.

"Yes, that's the point, isn't it?" Devon asked before shaking her head slightly. "At least you enjoyed the date before that."

Ginny nodded. "Theo's easy to talk to."

That made Devon laugh shortly. "Most people would have to disagree."

Sure, their conversations were sometimes erratic, but conversation always came easy between Ginny and Theo.

"He said he kissed you," Devon said, watching Ginny carefully through her still-red eyes.

Ginny was caught between embarrassment and confusion and something else she couldn't name. "Yes, he did. But it probably won't happen again any time soon."

"Because he's grieving?" Devon asked.

"No." Poor Theo, losing the grandfather he spoke so highly of. "Because there's someone else I really like, and Theo found that out just before we kissed."

Devon's mouth dropped slightly. "You went on a date with Theo while you liked someone else?"

"To be fair," Ginny said quickly, "I really do like Theo, and I wanted to like him more. I just can't shake this other crush."

Devon quietly laughed a quiet, surprised laugh, shaking her head. "No wonder Theo likes you. You're just like him: running so fast you can't even see where you're going until you hit it."

“And I have the bruises to prove that,” Ginny said with a smile. “How was your Hogsmeade trip?”

“Good. Good,” she repeated, as if surprised that it was true. “My boyfriend came in from Spain, so that was nice.”

“You have a boyfriend?” Ginny asked, leaning forward on her chair.

“Yes,” Devon said with a tight smile before sighing. “He’s coming in for the funeral.”

They stayed together for a full hour, intermittently talking and crying and smiling in the cold classroom where they had studied together for years. It never occurred to her to wonder why Harry hadn’t come to the study session.

With Theo gone, Devon sat mostly alone at the Slytherin table, though Ginny noticed both Baron Ramsey and Draco Malfoy speak with her. Malfoy actually sat beside Devon, and they talked for most of breakfast the next day, breaking the normal seating pattern at the table. Ginny spent most of the rest of the meal wondering what they could possibly be saying to one another and whether it would be appropriate to ask Devon.

It was just as Kerney, Nadine, and Ginny were leaving to go to Herbology that she turned her thoughts elsewhere.

“Where’s Andy?” Ginny asked, twisting around to scan the table for him. It was strange that they had left without him.

Nadine looked surprised. “He’s gone.

“Gone where?” Ginny asked, confused by her phrasing.

“He and Stevie went home to help the Caldwells,” Nadine said, her gloved hands tightly holding her books.

“Theo’s family?” Ginny asked, pausing just inside the door that led outside.

Nadine nodded. "Yes."

"Why would they do that?" Ginny asked. Kerney, standing beside Ginny, turned to her with a surprised look.

"Because Mr. Caldwell died," the Kernel said.

"I knew that," Ginny said, "but what does that have to do with Andy and Stevie?"

"Andy's uncle is Theo's uncle's best friend," Nadine said. It sounded a bit convoluted to Ginny. "Andy's mother was also Theo's mother's best mate at school. Their families have always been close. And after his father's death, Uncle Chad is going to be the head of the Caldwell family now, so they went to support him."

"Uncle Chad?" Ginny repeated.

Nadine shrugged. "Sorry. That's an old habit. We grew up with the McGraths, sort of."

"I had no idea," Ginny responded with surprise. How could she not know about this connection? "When do you think they'll be back?"

"I'd be surprised if Theo returned before the match against Hufflepuff," Nadine replied. That was nearly two weeks off. "Stevie should be back by Sunday, but Andy will probably be gone a bit longer to be there for Theo."

"Since when have Andy and Theo been friends?" Ginny wanted to know. How could she have missed this? Andy was one of her best friends, and she had really thought she was getting to know Theo. Apparently she had been mistaken.

"Since before they came to Hogwarts," Nadine replied, checking her watch and then beginning to walk toward the greenhouses again. "Andy's uncle Will used to pick him up and bring him over to the Caldwell's for play dates with Theo when we were little. Eventually he brought all of us. Normally drags us to a Ballycat game, too."

The family friend Theo had mentioned during their date—the Ballycat fan—it was Andy’s uncle. How odd.

“And it’s Andy’s uncle’s friend, Theo’s uncle, who is going to be the head of the Caldwells?” An old, respected family.

“Yes, Chad Cadwell. He’s great, and I feel really bad for him,” Nadine said. “Will and Chad took it upon themselves to force Theo to have fun like a child at the Caldwell house. It never really worked. He’d sit around talking to Naomi like the thirty year olds they always wanted to be unless someone forced them to play with us.”

That night, Ginny sent a letter to Theo and a request to her mother that she send flowers on behalf of their family.

On Thursday and Friday, Ginny noticed that there were quite a lot of students gone to travel to and attend the Caldwell funeral, including Luna, Malfoy, the Ryans, and a cluster of other Slytherins, including Devon, who had rescheduled their Potions review. Gretchen Ramsey was gone, and Ginny had a feeling that Baron would be too, if the Head Girl weren’t gone as well.

In the time between the funeral and the return of Andy and Theo, the most notable thing that happened was Ginny’s career planning meeting with Professor McGonagall that was required of all fifth-year students.

The first thing Ginny noticed walking into her career advice meeting was McGonagall’s particularly scrutinizing look. It was unsettling.

“Hello, professor,” Ginny said with an unsure smile.

“Good afternoon, Miss Weasley,” McGonagall said, sitting in a chair just beyond a table covered in a collection of pamphlets with glossy pictures depicting all of the jobs Ginny had considered and decided not to pursue: Healer (which her mother would prefer second only to Ginny popping out multiple grandchildren as quickly as possible, preferably with Harry), Potions curator, Gringotts employee (that particular picture was fairly unattractive, but seemed more life-like

than the rest), Experimental Floo Coordinator, Charmer, Daily Prophet employee.

There were more, but Ginny didn't feel much like looking at them. Her family often called her stubborn, and true to that depiction, she had come into this meeting knowing only two positions in the working force that would satisfy her—notwithstanding professional Chaser, which she doubted the deputy headmistress would accept.

"Sit," Professor McGonagall said, motioning to the seat across from her as she looked down at what might have been Ginny's course work and evaluation forms. Ginny resisted the urge to snatch them out of the professor's hand and read over them. Snape's comments would have been especially interesting.

"You have to do a lot of these, don't you?" Ginny asked, having heard from Othello that they discussed his entrance into the Ministry the day before.

"Yes," Professor McGonagall said, straightening her parchment. "But I enjoy the task."

Ginny smiled. "That's good."

"Have you given any thought to a career after Hogwarts?" Professor McGonagall asked, sounding, unless Ginny was mistaken, a little hesitant.

Sweeping her eyes over the pamphlets, she had to admit, "Yes. Actually, I've limited myself to two careers."

McGonagall almost—almost—smiled. "Like your brothers."

Distracted, Ginny asked, "They knew what they wanted to become?"

McGonagall inclined her head. "Mostly. Yes."

"Well, Charlie always wanted to do something stupid and dangerous, but he took a gap year to travel and just ended up in Romania," Ginny said, remembering with equal parts amusement and fondness her

mother's predictable reaction to the news that her second eldest son was going to go off adventuring with absolutely no plans.

"Yes, he also knew he wanted to work with animals, and liked the idea of living by his wand alone," McGonagall said, shaking her head a bit.

"I bet the twins were the most interesting meeting," Ginny said with a grin.

McGonagall let her affection for Ginny's brothers show more now that they were already gone. "They came in together, despite their separate appointments, insisted on making me tea, and calmly explained that they planned to undermine the government through radical political speeches and widespread dessert distribution. They also explained a goal to mobilize the people of the United Kingdom in order to create the world's largest human pyramid."

Ginny smiled in appreciation of her twin brothers. She had always thought that McGonagall had liked them best, despite herself.

"That sounds like them." Sometimes Ginny almost painfully missed her family. It was all well and fine to be near Ron, but there was nothing like being home with all of her brothers at once. Even Percy. "I bet Percy came in with a plan for twelve different career paths"

"Something like that." McGonagall definitely looked amused. "This meeting, however, is about your future."

"I'm interested in two fields: pursuing a Master in Potions or working as an Unspeakable," Ginny said bluntly.

"Why?" Such a simple question asked with so much vehemence. Ginny paused to decide exactly what she wanted to say.

"The Mastery is because I'm good at Potions, and working with Theo Nott this term really showed me how versatile the art can be." Theo had really taught her how good they could be working together. "And it's hard, after seeing those rooms in the Department of Mysteries, not to want to know more," Ginny said. "At least, it is for me."

The familiar flash of memory of Sirius came to Ginny, along with the image of the whispering curtain that only Luna and Harry could hear. Ginny thought of the brain-like things that had attacked Ron and time-turners spinning on their own. She also thought of the strangely optimistic man—Sebastian Smith—who had visited her father's office during the Christmas holiday.

Ginny wanted to know more.

"Working there is pretty much all I've wanted to do since last June," Ginny said to recover herself, but McGonagall's intelligent eyes looked oddly satisfied with Ginny's sentiment.

"Are you determined to be an Unspeakable?" the professor asked.

Determined? When Andy, and even Kerney, asked her what she wanted to do, Ginny always told them that she was open to possibilities. But that wasn't true, and if Ginny had to be honest with anyone about her goals, she supposed it should be her career counselor.

"Yes," Ginny said. "The only other job I'd really consider is being a professor. Of Potions."

McGonagall picked up the pamphlets and straightened them before sitting back—no, not relaxing—her back never touched the back cushion. "There is an opportunity during the summer holiday that might interest you."

"What sort of opportunity?" Ginny asked, curiosity more than a little piqued.

"The sort that is only offered to you, and only if you demonstrated a prior interest during your conversation with me," McGonagall answered in a very un-McGonagall, un-straightforward way. "It is an apprenticeship with the Department of Mysteries."

Ginny shook her head in disbelief. It was too convenient for her to be offered this after only just mentioning her interest in the subject. She'd never brought it up with anyone before.

"Why?"

"The reasons given," McGonagall said, summoning a piece of parchment from her desk across the room and handing it to Ginny, "were skill, intellect, and display of potential."

Once again, Ginny instinctively rejected such a generous offer. She had not appealed to the Department of Mysteries. How had they heard of her? She wasn't even the best student in the school.

To Professor McGonagall,  
Deputy Headmistress, Hogwarts School,  
Academic Advisor to Ginevra Weasley,

The Department of Mysteries extends an invitation to Miss Ginevra Weasley to study in the Department of Mysteries for the months of June through August of 1996, with an access level of Apprentice. Miss Weasley's unique potential, intelligence, and background have given rise to this invitation. Should she express interest, please inform her of our offer. We expect an immediate response.

Gertrude Wrightman

Unspeakable

Specialist in the Third Room

"Professor Wrightman?" Ginny repeated, her eyes dancing across the strangely sparkling blue ink.

"Yes, though I received it by ostentatious Ministry owl," Professor McGonagall said, judgment dripping from her carefully pronounced words.



"It certainly is a short letter," Ginny said, reading it again.

"It's how the department likes to do things: mysteriously," McGonagall said with evident derision. Ginny smiled at the professor's disgust as she kept reading.

One word caught her eye. "What do they mean about my background?"

"They did not send a separate letter to me," McGonagall said by way of an answer. Interesting. Everything that the professor knew, Ginny knew. It felt oddly dissatisfying. If information was kept from her until she was older than McGonagall, Ginny might just decide to give up on all these people.

"Professor, I'm taking all of the classes that I need. I plan to take N.E.W.T. classes in all of my current classes except History and Astronomy, which I think ought to help me with whichever career I choose," Ginny said, holding the stiff parchment in her clenched fingers.

"That sounds reasonable, though I would like to discuss alternate career choices at some point," McGonagall said.

Ginny nodded. "That would be great, but I really want to talk to Professor Wrightman about this."

"Of course," Professor McGonagall said, motioning toward the door. "The Weasleys have never had a normal career meeting."

Grinning, Ginny left the office in a hurry.

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Talking to Professor Wrightman was, as always, both frustrating and enlightening. Ginny had knocked and been surprised when the Defense professor opened the door to her office almost immediately.

"Miss Weasley." Wrightman stepped back to let Ginny enter.

"I just left my career planning meeting with Professor McGonagall," Ginny said, turning to see the professor shut her door and walk past Ginny to her desk without showing any reaction. Ginny decided that, as with most Slytherins, the direct approach would be best. "What can you tell me about this offer?"

Professor Wrightman didn't even look at the parchment Ginny held up. "It's an invitation to work in the Department of Mysteries."

"Yes. I was hoping you could tell me why I received it," Ginny said as she leaned against the armrest of the chair.

Wrightman—with not a single piece of her light blonde hair out of place—said, "I believe the exact reasons given were your unique potential, intelligence, and background."

"Yes, right." Ginny crossed her arms. "That's really vague and confusing."

"Do you not want the position?" Wrightman asked, sitting at her desk.

"I don't know yet," Ginny admitted, tucking a stray piece of hair behind her ear. "Did anyone else receive this invitation?"

"No." Gertrude Wrightman folded her hands in front of her and Ginny couldn't help but notice how perfect her nails looked.

"Why me?"

"Would you like me to repeat the 'vague' and 'confusing' reasons again?" It was mid-afternoon, but at this rate, it felt like the conversation would drag on for years.

"My dad says that there's no such thing as a free lunch, and this is the lunch of a lifetime, so to speak. No matter how good my marks are, I don't deserve this," Ginny said, leaving the armrest so that she stood upright on her own as she looked at her little blonde Defense professor. "So I want to know why."

Gertrude Wrightman looked at Ginny with her unwavering light blue eyes and said, "Tom Riddle." Ginny's face closed off, but Wrightman continued without pause. "You will learn about the entire department, and in return you'll let my colleagues and I study Tom Riddle through you."

"I'm not connected to him anymore. Any memory I have of him is four years old."

"You lie well," Gertrude said with something like appreciation as she straightened the quills on her desk into neat little rows.

Ginny refused to let a response show on her face. "I'm not lying."

Wrightman's face grew serious and a little sad. "You are a fifteen year old girl with prodigy-like proficiency in multiple areas of study. You understand concepts in advanced classes so quickly that it seems as if professors are only refreshing your memory rather than presenting new ideas. Most telling, your worst classes are subjects that either weren't offered fifty years ago or weren't taken by Tom Riddle."

No. Ginny refused to accept that. "I'm a seventh child and the first girl in seven generations. I work hard in classes that seem most worthwhile and that takes away from study time for other classes."

The woman didn't even blink. "The ability you have with wandless magic—though you do an admirable job of hiding it—is one only manifested in people whose personal magical mental wards have been thoroughly or violently breached and never fully rebuilt. As if magic is leaking through the cracks."

Ginny clenched her fists.

"Other people have the ability! It doesn't have to mean that the bloody Dark Lord's human incarnation lives in my head still!" Ginny didn't like the feeling that she had to defend herself. It never felt like this when she talked about it with Harry.

"Perhaps it doesn't. Or perhaps you, who were susceptible because of your birth, were affected by the hostile invasion of another consciousness on your innocent, eleven-year-old mind." Professor Wrightman's gaze never wavered. "Perhaps you ought to consider the possibility that when one of the most talented wizards to ever walk this Earth controlled your mind and body, he changed you."

"It was the memory of a man. Not the man himself." Her own doubts about that theory leaked into her words.

"Are you sure?" Wrightman asked. "Did it feel insubstantial?"

No. It had felt like a living, breathing creature wrapping his hand more and more tightly around her throat every waking moment. But Ginny wouldn't admit that.

She tried a different tact: "Tom's diary was destroyed. Harry did it himself."

"Yes, and when that happened, you were Riddle's only conduit to the world. Does it seem possible that he left behind pieces of himself in you? His knowledge, his power, or perhaps even something more, something he could reach out for later?"

"You're playing games with information you don't understand!" Ginny hissed, surprised by her own anger and the words that she hadn't meant to say. But she hated this. She hated hearing Gertrude Wrightman voice all of her inner concerns about herself, all of the thoughts she had pushed out of her head since the nightmares had subsided. Back then, when she had been lying in bed in the middle of the night, she had acknowledged that Voldemort would probably be able to control her more easily because of her experience in first year. And she had long recognized the fact that her ability with school probably related to the Chamber of Secrets and the diary, but the way Professor Wrightman talked about it made Ginny want to deny every part of everything she said.

"He's not still in me," Ginny insisted. "You don't know me. We've had all of three conversations and all were about you. You've never been anyone in my life except a professor that thought too highly of herself

because she is part of an archaic nobility that still bears less respect than the oldest names, the Founders' names."

"Listen to yourself," Gertrude Wrightman replied, sounding impassioned for the first time. "When you're angry, you grow cold, withdrawn. You exude power and a clear apathy towards those with whom you are angry, like you could hurt them without flinching."

Ginny felt as if she had been slapped. Instantly, her anger grew cold and just as she was about to respond, she realized she had done exactly what Professor Wrightman said she would do—exactly what Tom had done, and she hated this conversation all the more.

"You want to study me." Ginny's voice was practically hollow.

"I want you to work with some very talented witches and wizards to learn more about Tom Riddle and how his existence affects you." Trust a Slytherin to put a spin on a very simple fact.

"I won't spend three months being poked and prodded like a Potions experiment." Ginny could be doing more valuable things with her time.

"We would do no such thing," her professor said, looking disgusted that Ginny would even suggest it. "You provide a link to a man that threatens the world, a link no one else has. You would learn as much as we would, share in all of our findings."

Professor Wrightman had correctly divined that Ginny's ultimate weakness—other than Harry—was her desire for information, but she said, "Harry has the same connection."

The Defense professor shook her head. "His is different. More intimate."

"Then I imagine he would be a better test subject than me." Though that thought made Ginny feel a sharp stab of worry for her friend.

"Harry could and has provided valuable information about the Dark Lord, but now we want to know about Tom Riddle." Wrightman gazed

seriously at Ginny. "Besides, Harry has other things he must do this holiday, like staying with his aunt to renew the magical protection she provides him."

"Some protection," Ginny grumbled.

"He's alive," Wrightman said, "which would not be a guarantee if he were to work at the Ministry."

Ginny had already fought with adults over the idea of 'protection' at the Dursleys, so instead of picking a fight about that, Ginny asked for clarification of something else that was bothering her.

"If Tom hadn't possessed me, would you still have offered me this position?"

"No," Professor Wrightman said honestly. Ginny had to admire the way her teacher never seemed to lie. "However, had you shown less power, character, intellect, or potential, even if you had been through the same experience, you would not have been given this opportunity."

Well, at least there was that.

"What happens if I don't have the information you need about Tom Riddle?" Ginny inquired, with a strange kind of insecurity gnawing at the back of her mind.

"Do you know what Tom Riddle did in his third year to gain the attention of the Headmaster?" Professor Wrightman asked instead of answering the question. Ginny shook her head. "He sent a spell at the very door that you blew up when you ran from the Dementors."

Ginny instinctively shook her head as if to deny the implication. "It was a spur of the moment decision. The only way to alert the faculty to the danger."

"The only way? Or the way you instinctively thought to do it because in a hidden part of you that you hate and suppress and can't even feel, you hold the memories of a sixteen-year old boy who did the

same thing? Memories that could help defeat the man whose name so many fear to speak."

"He doesn't control me."

"But could he?" Professor Wrightman asked. Then more softly, "Wouldn't you like to know?" Again, Ginny thought of her dreams. Her teacher was apparently thinking related thoughts. "Wouldn't you like to know if you could be a threat to Harry?"

Ginny looked sharply at her professor and when she saw that she was sincere, Ginny sat into the chair. "You're playing to my weakness."

"I'm playing to your strength." The Defense professor sounded sincere. "The Department of Mysteries is neutral. We will give our findings to no one, only the results of the research in the forms of spells and potions that we have deemed appropriate tools."

There was a long pause before Ginny felt confident enough to respond. "Can I think about it?"

"Not for long," her professor said. "We would be proud to work with you, but if we must, we will begin other projects instead."

Ginny wanted to hit something. "You can't just dump this on me in this ridiculous letter, tell me I might embody some incarnation of Voldemort, and then expect an answer immediately. I'll have to talk to my parents, who will never in million years let me do this, by the way, and figure out transportation to the Ministry, and—"

"You would live with me during the holiday," Professor Wrightman cut in.

Ginny's jaw dropped. "What?"

"Only Unspeakables have direct connections to the Department of Mysteries."

"That didn't really stop six students from waltzing on in last June. Or a fleet of Death Eaters. How protected can it be?"

"The Death Eaters captured, tortured, and used the Imperious curse on one of our Seers to bypass a security ward that, through a flaw we had not been aware of, was not prepared to handle all of her blood being poured into it. The system override came on and allowed access to the main floors," she said in a clinically detached voice that Ginny knew meant she had to be suppressing her motions. "There was also quite a bit of dark magic and the help of the security system that the Ministry had secretly installed when they rebuilt the department in 1982. You had an easy time because the Death Eaters wanted you to come."

"I'm sorry," Ginny said. "I didn't mean to make light of someone's death."

"Yes, you did. But you meant it to be Sirius Blacks and Ethan Rooney," Wrightman said, and it took Ginny a minute to place the second name. A Death Eater who had died at Moody's hand the night of the attack.

"This is a lot to take in."

Wrightman pulled a roll of parchment from her lowest desk drawer. "This is a summary of your position, what you will be paid, and the housing arrangements. Two full weeks prior to entering the department, all personnel must reside with an Unspeakable. Apprentices must reside with their designated Unspeakable for the duration of their apprenticeship. Letters sent during this time will be monitored by the Head of the Department for approval."

"Nothing but letters! Restricted letters?" Ginny exclaimed. "Not even Hogwarts has rules like that!"

"You will have access to the highest clearance material in the Ministry. You will also undergo a Secrecy Spell," Wrightman said as if a Secrecy Spell was like a common Cleaning Charm.

"Do you really think I'm worth all this trouble?" Ginny asked.



"Yes," Wrightman answered.

Ginny took the parchment from her professor's outstretched hand.

"Consider it an opportunity to be away from your family for the first time. To know who you are without being defined by them." Not for the first time, Ginny thought Gertrude Wrightman was hardly one to talk about the virtue of not being defined by one's family.

"I'd still see my father at work," Ginny said, trying to excuse leaving her family behind to take her dream job.

"Rarely, if ever," Wrightman replied, dashing Ginny's hope of self delusion.

"You're being deliberately mean."

"You're being childish."

Ginny wrapped both her small, clean hands around the parchment. "If I do this, I'd like you to do something for me."

"Taking this apprenticeship isn't a favor to me," Wrightman pointed out.

"I know," Ginny said. "In fact, it would probably be the greatest experience of my life, but I want you to tell Harry about Sirius and you."

Wrightman grew stiff, but didn't immediately shoot down the idea, which was encouraging.

"You've taught me well this year and given me the chance to work at an amazing job. You even let me miss a month of your class because I threw a tantrum," Ginny said. "And Betsy Moran told me about the group of younger students you work with in your free time. It's clear that you're good at your job, and I'm grateful you're here, but I also know from that one memory that Harry deserves to know how close you and his godfather were."

Small and tense, Wrightman said, "This has nothing to do with today's events."

"No," Ginny said, "it doesn't. But for me to feel comfortable taking this job, I would need to know that Harry and you talked."

"It's a strange stipulation."

The knots in Ginny's stomach could attest to that. "I know."

But it was also something she felt strongly about.

"I'll let you know in a week. I expect your answer at that time."

"Alright. Thanks, professor, for this offer," Ginny said, standing.

"You're welcome, Miss. Weasley."

On her way back to the common room, Ginny ran into Hermione trekking through the corridors, a pile of books in her arms and parchment almost overflowing from her bag. If Hermione were anyone else, she might have looked overwhelmed. As it was, she simply looked determined.

"Hey Hermione," Ginny said, and when the older girl paused, Ginny came up beside her.

"Ginny! Hi."

"Need help with that?" Ginny asked, nodding at the books.

"Oh," Hermione said, looking down. "Oh no. I charmed them to make them light." She demonstrated by holding the large stack with one hand. "They could fit in my bag—I expanded it—but I was trying to decide which to read next, and it helps to see them."

"Alright," Ginny said. Her brother's best mate had always been quite studious, and Ginny wasn't in a position to judge.

"Where are you coming from?" Hermione asked politely as they started back toward their common room.

"My career meeting." It was easier than saying a meeting with Wrightman about a potential apprenticeship, at least.

"That's exciting," Hermione said, sounding genuinely interested. "Was there a certain career you wanted?"

"Yeah," Ginny said, deciding to share it with Hermione after a moment of hesitation. "An Unspeakable."

"Oh," Hermione said again, her excitement tempered with caution. "I could see how that would appeal to you."

"Really?"

Hermione nodded, adjusting her hold on her books. "Yes. It would suit you, I think."

Strange comment, but Ginny let it go. She didn't particularly need anyone else's approval for her career path, but it was nice to hear that someone said her choice fit her.

"What jobs did you discuss at your meeting?" Ginny asked, sure that Hermione had shown up with a dozen lists of job possibilities.

Hermione glanced at Ginny out of the corner of her eye, half shrugging as if embarrassed. "My career meeting was... uninspiring."

That was a shock. "I would have thought there were a thousand jobs that you would be interested in."

"There are," Hermione said sadly. "I want to work as a Muggle liaison. I want to be an advocate for elves. I want to reform the government, and write a proper Muggle Studies textbook. I want to do a hundred things."

"Then what's the problem?"

Hermione shrugged sheepishly, glancing down at her parchment and books. "They all felt so far away, the jobs. It was during Umbridge's tenure, you know, and Harry went before me, and all I could think about when I was talking to Professor McGonagall was that while I could plan for any of those jobs, the only certain thing in my future was helping Harry fight a war that the people in charge just wanted to hide." She let her eyes drift back to Ginny. "Sounds silly to say aloud."

"No," Ginny said. "It doesn't." But it was unexpected. For all that people called them the Trio, most of the student body regarded Harry and Ron as closer than Hermione and Harry, but in moments like this, Hermione's deep loyalty to Harry shone through. And it was blindly brilliant.

"I think I'm going to work at the Ministry this summer," Ginny said, suddenly sure it was true.

"That's wonderful. Where?"

"The Department of Mysteries," Ginny said, tapping the still-unopened parchment.

"They offered you a job? That's great, Ginny," Hermione said, sounding genuinely happy, although she still looked sad.

Ginny smiled. If it helped Harry, she would do it. If going and missing her family for three months and living in a lonely house in France and Flooing to the Ministry every day could somehow make Tom Riddle a little more vulnerable and make Harry and Hermione and Ron more likely to survive past their seventh year, it was worth it. She would take Gertrude Wrightman's offer.

## CHAPTER 13

### For What It's Worth

On the Thursday before the final Quidditch match, Ginny spent most of her time in class staring out the window, though it was an overcast day. For the most part, friends and classmates gave her a wide berth. The Quidditch match was between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, and the tension surrounding the impending matchup made all the players involved kind of unapproachable.

"It's like you're a god," Colin said laughingly as the entire fifth year of Gryffindor made their way back to the common room after dinner.

"Oh sure. Just like that," Ginny said sarcastically.

"I wonder if the Ravensclaws will use the same low flying strategy as last time," Artemis said, sparking a lively discussion that Ginny should have really enjoyed. Instead, she kept drifting back to thinking about the apprenticeship that she had officially accepted that morning. Intellectually, Ginny knew that she would have to tell her parents about the job soon, but realistically, she wanted to delay that as long as she could. Possibly until she moved in with Wrightman.

"You alright?" Kerney asked quietly, leaning close to isolate their conversation from the rest of the fifth years.

"Yeah," Ginny said, summoning a smile. The pair fell back from the others a bit. "It's nice to see Andy again, isn't it?"

Kerney nodded, glancing ahead where their blonde friend walked hand in hand with Nadine Ryan. "And Theodore Nott returned, too."

"I haven't spoken to him yet," Ginny said, scuffing her shoe along the ground. She had only just seen Theo at meals, back beside Devon like a book put back in its waiting slot on the shelf.

"Are you planning to?" Kerney never sounded judgmental.

"Of course," Ginny said, surprised that Kerney would even ask that. "We're meeting tomorrow night to work on his potion."

"You arranged a meeting without speaking. Impressive," Kerney said with that amused little look that she had.

"We wrote letters," Ginny said. Dozens of letters, starting with Ginny's condolence one that said they could put the potion on hold. He had replied that excuses were for Hufflepuffs, and she was to keep working. So she had.

"You wrote a letter? Wow," Kerney said, covering her eyes as they passed by a window. At this late date, the sun was setting later, giving ample opportunity for people to be blinded by its rays.

"Hey!" Ginny exclaimed as something small and furry ran straight into her ankle. She looked down in time to see Harry's kitten, Herpo, sprawled on the stone floor, shaking its little head. She scooped the adorable little creature up quickly. "Hello there, Herpo. I haven't seen you in a while."

"Herpo!" Harry's voice cut across the corridor.

"He's alright. Just a little directionally challenged. Plowed right into my ankle," Ginny said with a grin, cradling the kitten fondly in her arms.

"I'm going to go to the common room," Kerney said quietly.

Ginny glanced at her brown-haired friend. "Oh, wait for me. I just have to—"

"I'll see you there," the Kernel said before Ginny could argue, leaving the redhead rather confused. But before she could comment, Kerney was already gone, no doubt catching up with the group that had left them behind.

"Strange behavior," Ginny said, turning to Harry with a smile.

"Yeah," Harry said, looking awkward and mad and rather like he didn't want to be in the dark corridor.

"You okay?" Ginny asked.

"I'm great," Harry said shortly, teeth clenched as he clearly lied.

Irritated with his attitude, Ginny asked, "What are you so mad about?"

"I'm busy."

"Yeah, I got that from the way you've missed all of our Potions reviews lately," Ginny said archly. "I only ever see you at the D.A. and even then you leave as fast as possible."

The portrait above Harry's head featured three young women in long, old fashioned dresses who watched the scene with interest.

"I'm surprised you weren't too busy with your boyfriend to notice," Harry said, eyes flashing as he said it. "He's back I hear."

Oh, now she was mad, and even the gaping girls couldn't make Ginny stop herself as the magic inside her swirled. "If you're talking about Theo—"

"Oh, right! You wouldn't know because you're also dating Baron Ramsey, I just heard from Malfoy," Harry said, sounding angrier by the second, which just made Ginny even angrier.

Finally setting down Herpo in an effort not to squash him, Ginny glared at Harry. "You're mad about something Malfoy told you?"

"I'm not mad." His eyes, posture, tone, and words disagreed.

"Right. Because this is what you sound like when you're pleased," Ginny said sarcastically. "I thought you trusted me enough to talk to me."

"I used to."

“Used to?” Repeating the words didn’t make them make hurt less. “What the hell are you talking about, Harry? And I’d like a direct answer.”

“I like answers too,” Harry said, glaring as his fists clenched. “I’d like to know why you weren’t the one to tell me about Sirius and Wrightman. I’d like to know why you’ve been lying to me for months.”

A gust of unexpected wind swept through the corridor, whipping Ginny’s cloak around, but she didn’t even notice. “I told her to tell you.”

The black haired boy shook his head, his entire body tensed. “I trusted you.”

“I made her tell you.”

“Months later,” Harry said coldly. “I’ve seen you practically every day since Christmas, and you never said a word.”

Hating the guilt that ate away at her, she defended herself. “I didn’t know everything then.”

“And you do now?” Herpo had taken station beside Harry’s left foot, swishing his tail back and forth as he watched Ginny.

“You want to know what I know?” Ginny yanked her bag around and pulled out the folder of information she had gathered on Wrightman from research and letters to Bill and Moody. “I know she went to Hogwarts with your parents. I know she cared about them. I know she worked for the Ministry with your mum, in same department even.”

“My mum didn’t work for the Ministry,” Harry said, which made Ginny pause. Could Harry really not know this?

“Your mother was an Unspeakable, Harry. Started the year after she left school, and a year before Wrightman,” Ginny said. All of the information regarding the department was buried, including employment records, but the Ministry was a bureaucracy that required minute, public bookkeeping of all salaries. It wasn’t hard to



trace Wrightman and Lily Potter's career paths after discovering their locator numbers.

"That's not the point," Harry said, though he looked shaken. Ginny wanted nothing more than to make his pain go away.

"Wrightman's connected to your entire past, and it was her place to talk to you about it, not mine," Ginny said, clenching her teeth. She wanted to be that involved in his life.

"Did you know she had an arranged marriage to Sirius?" Harry asked, straightening his shoulders. He was so much taller than she always believed.

"Yes. Before her parents broke it off." That still burned at Ginny.

"So that business with Devon picking your dates wasn't a joke, was it? It's a possibility. Why wouldn't you have told me that?" Harry asked angrily, taking the conversation in a shocking turn. "Why wouldn't you have said anything about the fact that you want to be with a Pureblood?"

"Are you mad?" Ginny yelled back, not believing what she was hearing. Her disbelief was so powerful that she didn't even stop to wonder why Harry gave a damn.

"It isn't mad!" Harry fumed. "Wrightman said that she and Sirius arranged a marriage younger than you! It's normal, apparently, to contract out a marriage for a baby. So your fling with the Slytherins—"

"Fling!" Ginny repeated, incredulous, not even really processing the rest of his statement. "You have to be kidding."

"If you're going to marry one of them, why even be in Gryffindor? Why even—"

"Oh, shut it, you stupid prat," Ginny snapped. "Do you really think my parents would make me marry someone?"

"Are you telling me your parents didn't notice that they were both Purebloods?" Harry asked.

"Of course they noticed. But do you honestly think that my mother's family would have chosen my blood-rich, cash-poor father to continue the sodding line? Do you really think Arthur Weasley the Muggle-lover would have been their choice?" Ginny let out a strangled noise of frustration.

"Choice doesn't matter!" Harry said, pointing at her aggressively. "Blood matters."

"Not to me!" she yelled, throwing out her hands. "Not to my family! And you should know that."

Harry glowered. "If it did, it's not like you'd tell me though, right? That's part of the arrangement, the secrecy that you're so good at," he sniped.

"I can't believe you!" Ginny practically shrieked.

Harry's eyes were blazing. "What, you can't believe that I'd be upset to find out you're going to be auctioned off to the highest Slytherin bidder?"

She didn't even realize she had slapped him until after the loud CRACK had resonated in the air for a moment. The physical outlet of her anger was probably the only thing that kept her accidental magic from exploding the statue of Merlin in the corner. As it was, the marble figure wobbled precariously on its pedestal. Harry looked completely shocked, his cheek still glowing red from the impact. Ginny's hand stung.

"I'm going to write off that last comment as temporary insanity on your part, since I can't believe that you would ever disrespect my parents and your best friend like that," Ginny said with a steely voice that was nearly begging him to say otherwise. He wisely stayed silent. "Or that you'd ever think so little of me that I would allow someone to choose my husband for me."

“Wrightman gave up Sirius. Loved him, but turned her back on him for her family,” Harry said, barely containing the multitude of emotions crashing around beyond his eyes. And Ginny’s heart broke a little, thinking about how Harry would see the situation: as a betrayal of the one person he cared most for.

“My family is not like the Wrightmans, and I am not Gertrude Wrightman,” Ginny said, the word love echoing in her head along with the image of the teenage version of Sirius and Wrightman, unable to even look away from each other and sharing their intimate kiss.

“No, you’re Ginevra Molly Weasley, Pureblood descendent of the Prewetts and Weasleys,” Harry bit out. “Wrightman told me a bit about that, too.”

“Harry, that has nothing to do with me going to Hogsmeade with Theo or the Seventh Year Ball with Baron,” Ginny insisted. “The war changed a lot of things, burned away a lot of the old customs.”

“But not all,” Harry said. His arms were crossed and his pinky was unconsciously resting on the scar he had received during the Third Task.

“Your mother beat him,” Ginny said quietly, lifting her eyes from his scar to stare into his green eyes, wondering how this particular piece of information hadn’t resonated with Harry. “Your Muggle-born mother stopped a man who could trace his lineage to Salazar Slytherin, a man who killed entire Pureblood families. And the old customs broke.”

Standing in the very castle that Salazar had built, Harry Potter looked slightly quelled. “People like Wrightman still respect them.”

And in the cool night, Ginny replied, “I don’t.”

“Then why date Purebloods like Corner, Nott, and Ramsey?”

She didn’t want to fight him anymore. “Because they asked me, Harry. It’s as simple as that. Nothing to do with their house or background. They asked.”

Her answer didn't seem to move Harry. "It's more than that. I saw you kiss Nott in the corridor."

Ginny's heart skipped a beat, and it seemed the world melted away as she took in his burning intensity, even as he tried to suppress his anger.

"That's my own business," she said, feeling vulnerable and trying desperately to hide it.

"Right. Of course. Because when you said we could talk about anything, you meant anything except the fact that you're dating the son of a Death Eater who wants me dead and the king of Slytherin," he said, full of the unexpected rage he had been trying to hide.

Suddenly Theo's words from so long ago rang in her head: You date the son of a man who tried to kill him, and act like that won't hurt him.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," Ginny said honestly. "I didn't think you cared."

Harry's handsome face filled with anger. "Of course I cared."

"You didn't with Michael," Ginny said, voicing at last the confusion she had felt throughout the year. "You didn't care at all who I dated before now."

He stood firm. "It's different."

"They asked me," Ginny said again. It was the same reasoning she had used for Duncan, when people like Devon asked why she had agreed to go with him: she actually enjoyed spending time with these boys, so a date might be fun. She had long ago given up hope that the bloke in front of her now would ever ask her out, and she knew she couldn't put her life on hold for a pipedream. "Three very polite boys showed interest in me, and I said yes."

"So now you're dating both Ramsey and Nott?" he asked, disgusted and still angry.

“No,” she said, thinking of her friends. “I’m not dating either one.”

If she thought that was going to appease him, she was surprised to hear him angrily ask, “Then what the hell are you doing?”

And the world felt like it was crumbling.

What was she doing? She was casting an identical Patronus and pretending like it didn’t matter, growing closer to Harry and only liking him more all the time.

But she had seen the way he looked at Cho Chang the year before, and the year before that, when he wouldn’t even glance at Fleur Delacour during the Yule Ball because all he saw was Cho. It had killed Ginny a bit inside, so she buried that vulnerable, aching part of her heart that Harry always owned and didn’t want, and she said yes to Neville and then Michael and then Duncan and Theo and Baron.

And they were all good guys.

That was the worst part. Neville was sweet, Michael had a boyish charm, Duncan was a friend, and Baron made her feel special. And Theo... Theo made her feel like she was on fire, like anything was possible. She should have been happy with any of them. She felt like she could have been, except that she had met her match when she was just ten years old on a train platform with her entire family around her.

Because only Harry made her feel like he really saw her, knew her—both the good and awful--, and would never judge her. Only Harry made her feel like she was real and whole and perfectly fine, memories of Tom Riddle and all.

“I’m waiting for you,” Ginny said clearly, looking directly into his bright green eyes. She had guarded her heart against breaking for such a long time that she hadn’t dared think that things had changed between them.

“What?” He looked so surprised that Ginny really just wanted to cry because it was everything that she had ever feared: admitting her feelings for Harry and seeing nothing more than a blank look on his face, losing his friendship in addition to her pride.

But the words were already out, and Ginny couldn't keep herself from going on. “If you had asked me to Hogsmeade first, I would have told them all no. If I thought I had a chance with you, I wouldn't have dated any of them. But I couldn't keep living on hope, so I agreed to go out with them, only to realize a bit too late that I am still waiting for you. ”

Her humiliation and terror had reached a fever pitch, and she felt like she was panicking.

It didn't help that Harry stood there looking like an absolute fool. “Me?”

“Yes,” she said, unable to hold back a half-hysterical, half-pathetic laugh. “Five bloody years later, and I still like you.”

He kept looking seriously at her. “So Theo and Baron?”

“Are just friends.” The truth of that made her feel like a fool.

“A friend doesn't kiss you like that,” Harry said, pointing down the corridor as if it had just happened.

“A friend doesn't see that and not talk to you for a month,” Ginny replied, gesturing towards Harry, who grabbed her wrist and stepped closer to her.

“I can't just be your friend,” Harry said at last, breathing labored as his eyes bore into hers.

“What does that mean?” she asked, but he answered by merely lowering his head and pressing his lips against hers, where it felt like a thousand points of light exploded. His hand slipped off her wrist and onto her hip, and she stood there like a complete moron for a second, too surprised to react properly.

Then her mind caught up with her body, and she kissing him back, and he was pulling her closer as their lips moved together finally, at last. Her body fit against his, wrapped in his arms and pressed along his chest. His hands remained firmly on her side, holding her.

When at last they leaned back just a fraction of an inch, he whispered again, breath dancing across her cheek, "I can't just be your friend."

Smiling up at him, she said, "Good." And they kissed again.

As always, the final Quidditch match took place on a Saturday in early May, long enough before exams that people like Hermione weren't freaking out, but late enough that the weekend was supposed to be bright and sunny. Some years, it still snowed and dipped into chilly temperatures, but this year it looked as if Merlin himself had banished the clouds and dragged the sun up to celebrate the game.

Two hours into the game, Ginny was pleased with how it was progressing. As usual, the other team was no match for a Firebolt and a Retro, and she and Harry were dominating at their positions. Stevie was playing an inspired game for his family, including his dad and uncles and aunts who had come in to watch from somewhere in the Gryffindor stands. Ron was having a relatively easy go of it, only having let in one goal so far.

It didn't hurt that Harry had taken Cho Chang for a ride with that Wronski Feint a little while ago.

At any rate, with Gryffindor so comfortably in the lead, the Gryffindors were already celebrating their victory, which would secure the Quidditch Cup. Caught up in calculating the points to make sure that even if they lost the Snitch—fat chance with Harry as Seeker—they would still receive the cup, Ginny was caught aware when a Bludger smashed violently into her.

It knocked her over, almost off the broom. Luckily she hadn't lost her grip, and jerked her head around to see where the Bludger had come from. Calvin Wilde, the seventh-year captain. Not a bad bloke usually, but probably bitter at being so thoroughly dominated in his final outing.

"I'm on it!" shouted little Stevie McGrath as he streaked past her, bat at the ready. He belted that ball straight at Wilde's girlfriend Chaser, and a sickening crack told Ginny the bludger had connected as Ginny snatched the ball out of the air.

Suddenly the announcer cried out that Harry was on the move and Ginny looked up in time to see him streaking across the sky toward the Slytherin tower, Cho Chang only just realizing the direction she was heading and trying to desperately follow.

When Harry's brown glove shot up into the air in triumph, and she caught a glimpse of the fluttering gold ball, she threw a fist up in celebration and screamed, flying as fast as she could to reach him.

He landed underneath the Gryffindor stands, which meant that, despite her wonderfully fast broom, half of Gryffindor House reached him before she did. She could see Ron and their Beaters, Jack and Stephen, already piled on top of him. As she hopped off her Retro, she entered the bustling crowd with a shout.

"Oy! Mates! Let the Chasers through!"

And the horde of red parted like the sea as she stepped toward the four boys, Katie and Betsy close behind her. Once they were in sight, the boys turned around and Ginny took off at run, dropping her broom as her brother plucked her off the ground.

He twirled her around in celebration, and when Ron put her down she was met next by Jack, who she hugged quickly. Next she turned to Stephen McGrath, who greeted her with bright eyes and a grin that took up his entire face. She squeezed him tight as well, only to be torn off of him by his older brother.

"Gin, you were brilliant!" Andy yelled over the din.

She smiled and embraced her friend, delirious with joy. He squeezed her tight before letting her go exchange hugs with her fellow Chasers. The crowd began to settle down as she finally got a chance to look around for Harry.



As she walked back toward Ron, her arm was yanked to the right, and Harry's beaming face briefly came into view before she was lifted effortlessly off the ground, squeezed against his entire body.

His embrace felt like home, Ginny thought irrationally as she clung to him, laughing and smiling and happy.

After the Quidditch trophy had been presented and yet more cheering rose up from the Gryffindor students, the crowd on the pitch began to calm down and disperse in the general direction of the school. Ginny was standing with Harry, Nadine, and Andy, reminiscing about the first game they had played against Ravenclaw, when her ingenuity had begun a new trend of Quidditch uniforms at Hogwarts.

Just when Andy had caused them to laugh in remembrance of Stevie knocking out the Chaser, the very same third-year boy walked up to them, accompanied by Nadia and several adults. When Andy caught sight of his brother's companions, he smiled.

"Ginny, Harry, this is my dad. Dad, this is Harry and Ginny," Andy said, motioning toward the tall man with dark blonde hair. Mr. McGrath nodded and smiled, looking somewhat bittersweet when Harry reached out to shake his hand.

"Nice to meet you," they both said. Merlin, Mr. McGrath was handsome. Not bloody hot like Sirius had been in his prime, but handsome and kind-looking, like his son.

"And this is my Aunt Tracy," Andy added, indicating the blonde woman who was shorter than Ginny; Andy looked to Harry, "who played Quidditch with your dad at school."

Harry smiled as he followed Ginny in shaking the woman's hand.

"Nice to meet you," Ginny said, smiling. None of the adults could keep their eyes off Harry, which was to be expected from almost all wizards, but especially this group who had gone to school with Harry's parents.

"This is Chad Caldwell, Theo's uncle and mine unofficially," Andy added, with regard to one of the younger men. Ginny and Harry greeted and shook hands with him, Ginny thinking that perhaps he had the same eyes and jaw as Theo.

"And this is my Uncle Will, his wife Colleen, and my cousin Michael," Andy continued, gesturing to the younger blonde man and his brown-haired wife and adorable son, who could not have been older than three.

"You're overwhelming them," Will said laughingly, nodding at the pair. Will was just as good looking as Andy's dad, but slightly shorter and thinner with a more athletic build, and the brown-haired Colleen was clearly several months into another pregnancy.

"Not my fault you all showed up at once," Andy teased, grinning.

"They saw the whole match!" Stevie chimed in happily, swinging his Beater's Bat around.

"And cheered the loudest when you made that Chaser spin on her broom and completely miss the hoops," Will said, giving his little nephew a one-armed squeeze.

Not caring about the conversation going on way above his head, little Michael McGrath watched the people in front of him until his eyes landed on Harry. He gave a squeal, pointing at Harry.

"Mummy, that is Harry Potter!" the little boy said, looking around at the grow-ups as if they were crazy to have missed this shocking development. After all, it wasn't every day that someone famous appears, let alone Harry Potter.

"Yes, it is, but what have I taught you about pointing?" Colleen said, taking his hand.

"Not to do it," Michael replied, skulking back to his mother's side, eyes glued on Harry. "But it is Harry Potter."

“Right,” Colleen McGrath replied. She turned to address Harry with a friendly, apologetic smile. “Sorry about that. He’s still learning his manners.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Harry said, flattening his bangs with one hand, which caused Andy’s Uncle Will to laugh.

“You flatten your hair!” Will said, chuckling. “Your dad—who was my absolute idol in school, by the way—used to make his stick up.”

Harry’s hand froze.

“Will here tried to wear his hair the same way our second year,” Chad said, his eyes lighting up with laughter as he clapped his mate on the shoulder.

“A short-lived, very bad idea,” Will acknowledged with a smile, patting his sandy-blond hair, the same shade as Andy’s dad’s. “It made your mother laugh, which would have been humiliating, what with her being gorgeous and five years older than me, but she apologized, gave me a hug, and assured me that she was laughing at James and thought I was perfectly fine. Your dad did not appreciate that.”

“You, however, have the real Potter hair. You’ve had that wild hair since the day you were born,” Chad said, nodding at Harry’s mess of black hair. “I’m know you can’t remember that far back, but your mum sent us pictures of you when you were so small that your dad held you in one hand like a Quaffle, and you had that mop even then. I probably still have that letter, announcing your birth. She was a great writer. Very funny and self-deprecating.”

“Much like she always was,” Matt said fondly.

Having spent some time with Remus and Sirius, Ginny knew that Harry had heard some things about his father: he was good at Quidditch, loved pranking, hated Snape, and was generally seen as the life of the party. But if Harry’s reaction to the yearbooks in the library was any indication, he had never really heard anything about his mother. Which was probably why he looked so surprised by Chad’s casual comment.

"It sounds like you knew my mum well," Harry said, clearly curious.

"Yes," Chad said, nodding. Ginny thought he looked a bit like a politician with his tanned skin and perfectly combed brown hair. "Will and I only went to school with her for two years, but she was good friends with my sister, who was in her year with Tracy, so I saw a lot of her before Hogwarts even."

"Besides knowing our sisters, Lily caught us sneaking around the castle late at night all the time," Will said with a grin.

"Big surprise," Colleen said, rolling her eyes at her husband. "You've been corrupting Chad for years."

"He corrupted me!" Will insisted. "I always said we should stay inside and do our work like good Ravenclaws." He picked up his son and stage-whispered in his ear, "Ravenclaw is the very best house at Hogwarts, you see."

"Except that we just beat them for the Cup!" Stevie said happily, still bouncing from foot to foot. The young boy looked ready for a race instead of completely wiped out by the long match.

"Well, I've had a long time to learn how to accept defeat at the hands of Gryffindors," Matt McGrath said, whom Ginny only just remembered had been a Ravenclaw in school as well. "Your dad, Harry, led his Quidditch team to victory three out of the five years he was on the team when I was at school."

"That's because James Potter was amazing at Quidditch," Will said, tossing his son up into the air and catching him mid-giggle. "Like you're going to be, Mike."

"I've seen James Potter's Quidditch Award," Stevie said.

"Cleaned it in detention?" Will asked, grinning when the boy avoided his dad's eye.

“Quit harassing my son,” Matt chided lightly before turning back to Tracy. “James really was good though, wasn’t he?”

“He was great,” Chad said easily.

“That’s what people tell me,” Harry said, shrugging.

“You’re better,” Andy’s Aunt Tracy told Harry in a somewhat strained voice. She attempted a half-smile, but Ginny noticed that it did not even come close to reaching her eyes. Harry and Stevie smiled at this information, which seemed to brighten her spirits a bit.

“He played a different position, of course,” Harry said to keep the conversation from stalling. Ginny smiled at the attempt. “I’m sure I’d be rubbish at Chasing compared to him.” He glanced at Ginny, who promptly piped up.

“What do you mean compared to him? You’d be a rubbish Chaser compared to anybody!” Ginny insisted, grinning at him playfully. He laughed.

“Certainly compared to you I would,” he admitted. Ginny beamed at the compliment. Harry turned to Mr. McGrath. “Andy said that you were Head Boy the year before my dad.”

Mr. McGrath smiled kindly. “Yes, and if you join us for dinner, I’ll tell you a dozen stories about your parents that will probably bore you to tears.”

“Take him up on that,” Will said, his son resting happily on his hip. “Stories about Lily and James are never boring.”

“They did make my seventh year rather incredible,” Matt replied. Most of the group seemed to lighten at the topic of Harry’s parents again. Interestingly, it seemed to have the opposite effect on Andy’s Aunt Tracy, whose face was blank and whose jaw seemed to harden. After a pause Mr. McGrath spoke again, with an almost disbelieving smile. “I’m sure you’ve heard this a million times, but you do look almost exactly like your father.”

Harry nodded.

"Yes, sir. That and my mother's eyes," he finished for him. Mr. McGrath laughed, sounding genuinely shocked and pleased to be talking to Lily and James' son. All the students smiled while Andy's aunt showed no reaction.

"Yes, indeed. Lily's famous green eyes," Will said, shaking a finger at him as he held little Michael on his hip with the other arm. "It must get bloody annoying having all these people you don't know gawking at you and telling you things when they don't know a lick about you."

Harry grinned sheepishly. "Just a bit."

"Well, I know I'm just Andy's father to you," Matt McGrath said, "but Lily was a good friend, and I respected your father quite a bit. They were very good to my wife and me."

Chad and Will smiled sadly in fondness for all three of the deceased, but Tracy McGrath Merton was looking more uncomfortable by the minute.

"Thank you for saying so," Harry replied earnestly, but with a contented expression.

Will piped in eagerly: "Your mum was the best Head Girl around. Never took off points for catching us out despite having done so the year before. Said that as long as we weren't trying to hurt anyone, she'd let us go."

"She said that with times the way they were, she'd actually give us points for making people laugh if it wasn't at anyone else's expense, but I never saw the fruits of that," Chad Caldwell said, smiling.

"I've never met one of her friends before this year," Harry said. The group stiffened in surprise for a moment, and Ginny grabbed his hand without thinking.

Will looked at Chad and then Tracy, holding his son in his arms, before telling Harry, "That's probably because your mum had so

many friends that we were all sure someone else would tell you about her.”

Chad gave his friend a scolding look. “It’s because my sister was her best mate, and she wouldn’t exactly be allowed to visit you.”

At the word ‘allowed,’ Harry’s eyebrows went up, and he was probably wondering if this was the same sort of ‘allowed’ that had kept Sirius from visiting him. Ginny wondered if this group knew that Sirius Black was innocent.

“Your sister?” Harry asked.

“Theo’s mum,” Ginny whispered, remembering pieces of conversation with Theo and Devon and the pictures in yearbooks.

“It could also have to do with the fact that your parents were so entrenched in the war,” Tracy said, locking eyes with Harry. “They lost many friends.”

The entire group seemed to freeze, and Ginny didn’t doubt that the adults were all thinking of the many people lost during the war, just as Ginny was thinking of Sirius falling behind the curtain and the uncles she would never know.

“Actually, if you’d like to hear a story about them, I could tell you how they finally started dating,” Mr. McGrath said, breaking the tension when several people smirked.

“Really?” Harry said. “From what I learned last year, my mum hated my dad for a long while.”

Tracy clenched her jaw, but Matt smiled and said, “Well, I don’t know about that. But I know your father was absolutely in love with her by sixth year, when he tried to punch me in the face.”

Will and Chad laughed heartily, obviously knowing the incident to which Andy’s dad was referring. Harry’s eyes widened, but he calmed when he saw that Mr. McGrath was still grinning at the memory.

“Tried to?” Harry repeated.

“Well, it’s a long story,” Matt said. “He thought your mother was in love with me, and that I was hurting her.”

Harry looked slightly embarrassed at this information, but was a little heartened when Ginny squeezed his hand and smiled at him. Andy and Stevie looked confounded at the news of this oddly intimate connection that their parents apparently with Harry’s.

“Was she?” Ginny asked, knowing Harry never would. “In love with you, I mean.”

Mr. McGrath laughed openly at the question. Harry seemed a bit less anxious; if Matt McGrath could laugh about it now, it couldn’t have been too bad, could it?

“Oh, no,” Mr. McGrath said. “But that’s where the story gets complicated.”

Andy and Harry looked equally curious.

“You see, your dad had fancied your mum for a few years before that, and she had never given him the time of day. And around the same time, I had started suspecting that a friend of your father’s was a werewolf, your old Defense professor Remus Lupin,” he explained. Ginny liked that the fact that Remus being a werewolf didn’t seem to matter in the slightest to this man. Oh yes, this was Andy and Stevie’s family, all right.

“So, your father and his friends learned of my suspicion, you see, and decided that James would drink Polyjuice Potion, which would make him appear to be Remus, so that ‘Remus’ would be able to do his Prefect rounds during the full moon, thus disproving my theory.” The kids all smiled. “And their plan worked like a charm, until James started to Polyjuice himself for every one of Remus’s patrols with her because he wanted to spend time with Lily, and she, thinking he was Remus, became good friends with him and told him all about this boy she was in love with, who was now dating one of her best friends.”



Harry was transfixed. Ginny got the impression that he had never gotten this kind of memory from Remus or Sirius. It seemed to relax him, and she was glad to see that their little group was now quite alone on the Quidditch pitch.

“So, who was the boy she liked?” Nadine asked, clearly enraptured in the story. Mr. McGrath looked at her with all the affection of a family friend who had known her for her entire life.

“Well, James thought it was me, because it had recently come out that her friend Christine—their mother—he motioned to Andy and Stevie—“and I were dating. But it was really your dad,” he said, looking at Harry with a smile. “You see, there had been a terrible misunderstanding earlier in the year, when your mum had somehow come to the conclusion that James was dating Tracy.” He motioned to the strangely uneasy Tracy standing to his side. “And of course, the fact that James was hearing while convinced that Lily hated him, and Lily thought he was Remus, didn’t make it any less confusing when the truth finally came out.”

“So she really liked Harry’s father?” Ginny asked, startling Harry out of his reverie.

“Yes,” he started, eyes still on Harry. “But James didn’t know that. He thought she hated him and couldn’t figure out why. So the Polyjuice scheme provided the perfect opportunity for him, he thought.”

“Except for one small problem,” a new voice added. Harry and Ginny grinned with delight when they saw a tired, but happy-looking Remus Lupin walking up to the group. Mr. McGrath looked happy to see him, as did Chad and Will. Remus put out his hand, for Andy’s dad. “Nice to see you, Matt.”

“You too, Remus,” Mr. McGrath replied warmly. They seemed very familiar with each other, and this visibly added to Harry’s general contentment with the occasion. “You remember my sister, Tracy?”

Remus nodded to the blonde woman.

“Of course,” he said with equal politeness, although it was abundantly clear that Tracy and Remus did not share the friendship that Matt and Remus did. “Hi Tracy.”

“Hello, Remus,” she said with not a little stiffness. Harry’s expression darkened slightly. As Remus exchanged much more pleasant greetings with the other three adults, Ginny wondered whether it was the werewolf issue or something to do with the Potters that had come between the former housemates. Remus, observant as usual, turned the conversation back to its original subject.

“Like I was saying, the plan was brilliant until Lily ruined it all,” Remus said jokingly. Mr. McGrath laughed.

“What’d she do?” Harry asked.

“Well, she began to fancy the Remus she knew from her patrols. Only it wasn’t me, it was James. So she was pretty confused when her Prefect partner acted like one bloke during their walks around the school, and then acted totally different during the day,” he finished. Ginny, Nadine, and Nadia were all taking in the story with considerable affection. The boys seemed amused at the predicament.

“And when James decided I was the one breaking Lily’s heart,” Matt added, “he confronted me and wasn’t pleased when I laughed at the idea that Lily liked me. We had a rather loud argument.”

As Harry shook his head, he removed his hand from Ginny’s and slid it around her waist, causing her to lean in casually against him.

“But he must not have believed me, because soon after that, when I was filling in for Remus another time, he came after me again, only as Remus this time. Which is when he tried to punch me.”

“Tried but failed,” Will said with a delighted grin, “because Lily stunned him mid-swing.”

Everyone laughed, and Harry looked delighted at the actions of his mother.

Matt nodded. "And I left Lily and 'Remus' to their patrol, thinking they could sort out the misunderstanding, but that was the night that James let the potion wear off, and Tracy came running after them because she had found out about the plan, and Lily found out."

"Needless to say, Lily was furious," Remus added, picking up the story. Ginny and Nadine shared a look and nodded to express their agreement with Lily's take on the issue. "By that time, all of us except for James and Lily knew that they were mad for each other. Lily was simply livid at everyone other than Matt and Christine, who were the only two not in on some kind of plan to force them together. James was mad at the situation, because the girl he adored had only liked him when he looked like someone else. Tracy was outraged that we'd do such a thing, and another girl in our year, Samantha Caldwell—Chad's sister—was horrified. It was quite a mess."

"But everything turned out in the end, right?" Ginny proposed, causing Harry to turn his head and look down at her where she stood by his side. "I mean, they got married and everything, didn't they?"

"Yes," Remus replied with a slight smirk. "But not until Lily made him wait all summer before she would agree to officially go out with him."

The conversation carried on in this manner for some time, with Remus and Matt McGrath recalling stories about James, Lily, Sirius, and Christine, and the children all listening in rapt attention. No one seemed to notice Andy's Aunt Tracy, who trailed the group stoically as they retreated under the falling darkness to the Great Hall for dinner.

"Uncle Will! Uncle Chad! Sit by me," little Nadia Ryan demanded happily as they entered the Great Hall. She wasn't really related to them, but Ginny remembered Devon explaining how close all three families were.

"Nadia Ryan, are you already trying to be the boss of everyone at Hogwarts?" Chad Caldwell teased, moving to sit beside her.

"She's probably plotting to rule the castle," Will McGrath said with a grin, joining them. "Unless you've already conquered it?"

“Not yet,” she said with a great big smile, sliding into the seat next to her adopted uncle.

“We’re trying our best, though,” Stevie said, happily munching away on a carrot his father handed him.

“Oh, little hellion,” Colleen said suddenly to Nadia, splitting her attention between the girl and her young son who was trying to spoon himself soup, “I brought you that present you wanted. I’ll give it to you after dinner.”

Nadia and Stevie shared a look. “Excellent.”

Soon all of the Ryan and McGrath children were engaged in lively conversation with the group, including the oldest Ryan girl, Naomi. It made Ginny feel rather homesick for her own family, but also happy for Andy, who glowed around all of his closest family friends. She worried briefly about Harry feeling left out, but Matt McGrath and he were immersed in a conversation with Remus about school and memories.

The meal passed pleasantly, with Ginny listening with one ear to all conversations.

“You know who you should really look to for advice about these pranks?” Chad told Nadia and Stevie, who leaned forward eagerly. “Harry.” He pointed at the dark-haired boy, as if anyone in the world didn’t know who he was.

“Harry doesn’t prank people,” Nadia said, practically rolling her eyes at the idea. “He helps people.”

“Yeah. I told you about Harry standing up to that bully of a professor, Umbridge. He wouldn’t let her pick on anyone. Even Loony Lovegood,” Stevie said.

Chad smiled fondly. “Doesn’t mean he won’t do one little prank.”

“He’s fought a dragon and merpeople,” Nadia said, pointed her fork at her uncle as if that proved her point. “He doesn’t prank.”

“His father and that man sitting next to Matt were the most notorious pranksters to ever come to Hogwarts, and I’m sure they taught Harry all their secrets,” Chad said. The second years’ eyes widened, and both looked at Harry.

“Harry does know all the secret passages,” Stevie whispered. “And secret rooms.”

“He knows loads of spells,” Nadia said, considering.

Not really wanting to know where their thoughts were going to take them, Ginny found herself wondering if this would this have been Harry’s natural place if his parents had lived, away from the Weasleys and entrenched in this laughing group who had known his parents so well.

“Hello, Uncle Chad,” Theo Nott said, striding up.

“Hi, Theo. It’s good to see you,” Chad said happily, standing.

Theo scanned the table, pausing on Ginny before going back to his uncle. “You had to sit at the Gryffindor table, Uncle?”

Chad smiled. “We came to watch Stevie. It seemed polite to eat with him.”

“Though it is kind of gross sitting with all these Lions,” Will McGrath said, grinning. His wife elbowed him lightly on the arm.

“You can’t sit with us?” Chad guessed, glancing at the Slytherins who were watching the exchange.

“He could,” Ginny piped up, “but he’s too proud to.”

Theo grinned. “Too elite, I believe is the word you were looking for.”

“But we won the Cup!” Stevie announced again. “We’re the best.”

"I saw. That Ravenclaw you hit had to go to the Hospital Wing, you know," Theo said. Stevie failed to hide his grin.

"Join us," Chad said, motioning to the table.

"You do look like you need a big meal, stick boy," Will said, holding out a piece of cake.

"My mother would keel over," Theo said.

"Even better!" Will McGrath laughed, scooping Michael up onto his lap and feeding him a fork full of cake. "Where's your other half? Did she find better company?"

Theo smirked. "As if that were possible."

"Sit down and tell us all about your day," Will said, patting the seat next to him.

"I could use some help reining them in, Theo," Colleen said, nodding at her husband and Chad. The smile on Theo's face transformed him. This might be the first time Ginny had seen him so genuinely happy. Still, the shock of seeing him sit at the Gryffindor table, however briefly, kept her from teasing him any more.

"Why do all of my nieces and nephews like you more than me?" Will McGrath asked his wife, who smirked.

"I bribe them," Colleen said, reaching into her purse and tossing a chocolate frog at Theo, who caught it easily, smile still in place.

They were all so wrapped up in their conversation that no one noticed when Tracy Merton left the table, food barely touched and drink only half-empty. No one noticed her reaction to seeing their blonde Defense professor in the corridor, and no one noticed the hardening of the professor's gaze and jaw.

"Your uncle and the McGraths are amazing," Ginny said as Theo and she walked down the corridor after dinner.

"They are, aren't they?" he asked with a contented smirk, which made her laugh. Harry, Andy Stevie, and Matt had gone for a walk somewhere. Will and Colleen had left early, claiming they needed to put their baby to bed. Chad Caldwell had said goodbye to his nephew with promises to talk soon, and the Ryans had gone up to the common room. Theo and Ginny were the odds ones out.

They made it a few more steps before Ginny stopped, forcing him to do the same, raising a eyebrow in question.

"Thank you," she said suddenly. "For not making this awkward, you and me being friends."

He brushed that aside. "I am never awkward."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, thanks anyway."

He looked at her carefully. "You aren't doing something stupid like failing to tell Potter you care for him, are you?"

She started. "What? No."

"Good," he said with a nod. "Because as I've told you, I can't stand stupid people."

"Gee, thanks," she said sardonically. "As long as I can appease you, my life is that much better."

"I would assure you that my existences makes many people's lives better, but I see Devon waiting for me at the end of this corridor, and I'd hate to keep her waiting," Theo said.

"Whatever," Ginny said, waving goodbye to him. The tall Slytherin strode off, leaving Ginny feeling rather content. He had accepted her decision to be just friends with ease, slipping back into the platonic relationship without problem, and Ginny really was grateful.

She walked back to the common room with the intention of taking a shower before the huge party that was surely already starting. But on

the way up to the tower, Ginny ran into Luna, who insisted they take a walk outside to appreciate the rare sunset.

“What’s so rare about it?” Ginny asked.

“It’s only happening today,” Luna said, as though it were obvious. “Tomorrow will be entirely different.”

After the hectic day of Quidditch and friends’ families, Ginny was happy to unwind with Luna. So Ginny found herself enjoying to the “perfect spot,” where the two friends collapsed and watched the sun set and talked about the game. After dark, walking back into the castle, they split ways around after a stray staircase decided to take them down two floors, the wrong direction for both.

“Maybe we’ll have better luck taking the long ways back,” Ginny said, laughing.

“Maybe I’ll find a stray suit of armor that’s up for a game of cards,” Luna said hopefully.

“Maybe.”

“Andy’s family was nice,” Luna said, stopping at the point where they needed to part ways.

“They were.”

“I liked Michael. He asked me about my earrings,” Luna said, touching the little radishes. “Children always like me more than people my age.”

“I like you,” Ginny pointed out.

Luna smiled. “That’s nice of you to say.”

“I mean it,” Ginny said.

“It’s nice to have friends,” Luna said. “See you tomorrow.”



And Luna skipped away, content and pleasant as always. Ginny took the long way back, as she suspected that the common room would still be very much in uproar with the Quidditch victory party, and she wanted a bit of a break before facing her rambunctious housemates. As she passed through the Charms corridor near the main entrance where the stairs dropped them off, she heard voices—a man and a woman, it sounded like—and peeked around a corner to find out whose they were.

Tracy Merton stood with her arms crossed over her chest, staring out the window next to the doors. The lake looked black in the night, with the moon's reflection casting a single line of light diagonally across it.

"--thought you'd at least enjoy the game," Mr. McGrath was saying as he leaned a shoulder against the wall. Ginny envied his effortless ability to look casual and poised. "You used to love Quidditch."

"I still do," Mrs. Merton said without moving. They stood like that for a while before a slow smile appeared on Mr. McGrath's face.

"And you have to admit it was nice seeing that Harry flies just like his father," he said to his younger sister. "The way he—"

"He doesn't fly like James," Tracy said, cutting him off. "When James flew, people watched. He was flashy and cocky and daring. Harry—Harry flies like Lily cast charms: so skillfully that it looks easy. None of the students watched him. The crowd wouldn't have even seen his perfect final dive if the announcer hadn't yelled. He would have won the game for them all, and no one would have seen it because he was that good."

"Tracy—"

"Don't."

"You needed to be here."

"I did not," Tracy said, small and stiff, her arms wrapped around her chest as if she was trying to hold herself together. "I came because you wanted me to see him. Well, I did. Are you happy now? I know

what I gave up. He looks just like them, and he didn't have a clue who I was. I get it."

"You could have told him," Mr. McGrath said, stepping forward but keeping a large distance between them. "He wanted to know about her."

"What did I ever know about the great Lily Evans?" Tracy asked, arms tightening.

"You were her best friend." Which was news to Ginny.

"Samantha was her best friend. Samantha and then Sirius Black and James Potter. Not me." Tracy shook her head. Her blond hair was cut short above her shoulders and tucked behind her ears. "She had a knack for picking them."

Mr. McGrath still looked calm. "You knew her better than most."

Tracy glared back out the window. "I saw Gertrude Wrightman here today. I'm sure she could tell him more about Lily than I could. One of the last things Lily said to me was a defense of Wrightman."

"Tracy—"

"And maybe I'm a coward," Tracy said, turning to her brother. "But I made the right choice. I did. I know you want me to say that I wish I would've stayed, that I should have been more like you and Remus Lupin, but I won't. I won't because I could have just as easily been Lily or James or Christine—"

"Don't you dare," snapped Mr. McGrath in a voice that did not seem to be his own. "Don't you dare say it was okay to run because of what happened to my wife!"

"She died, Matt, because she and Lily chose to broadcast their alliances."

Ginny would have cursed this angry-speaking idiot of a woman, but Mr. McGrath beat her to the punch.

“She died because a madman let loose a dozen Dementors. Not because of her alliances.”

Oh, Merlin, Ginny thought. That was why he had wanted Andy and Stevie to learn the charm so badly. That was why—oh, it hurt too much to think about. That explained the owls Andy had received after the Dementors were in Hogsmeade.

Tracy shook her head and blinked back tears. “Christine was my best friend, Matt. It hurts me too.”

“Oh, so that’s why you didn’t write her—”

“Is this why you invited me here? To berate me?”

“This isn’t about you, Tracy,” Mr. McGrath said. “This is about my son and the fact that he wanted his legendary aunt, the Gryffindor Beater, to see his big match.”

“Well, I saw the game. I don’t see why we can’t leave or why you’re on such friendly terms with a werewolf.” Oh, yes, it was official: Ginny Weasley hated Tracy Merton. “What’s next? Are you going to invite Gertrude Wrightman and Severus Snape to talk about Lily when we know the former would have sold Lily to Voldemort and that Snape actually did?”

Mr. McGrath looked as disgusted as Ginny felt. “You don’t know either of them, let alone Remus Lupin. All your life you’ve assumed you understood the world. Well, why don’t you go owl the wife of the bastard who probably ordered those Dementor attacks, the only person you made an effort to stay friends with after Hogwarts?”

“Sam didn’t hurt anyone.”

“No,” Matt McGrath said, sounding angrier than anyone Ginny had ever heard before. “She stayed so perfectly neutral while better women fought.”

“Samantha and I are still alive. Our sons have their mothers.” Ginny had to physically restrain herself to keep from hexing Tracy Merton. Matt McGrath voiced what was going through her head.

“And that’s worked out so well for Theo,” he bit back.

The two stood there glaring and angry.

“Don’t let Andy involve himself in this, Matt,” his sister finally said, breaking the silence.

“My son will make his own choices.”

“I know you hate me. But we used to be close, and you’re still my brother. Please listen to me. Take him out—out of Hogwarts if you have to,” Tracy said, pleading and desperate.

“We will not run from what’s coming.”

“She’s poison for him,” Andy’s aunt continued. “She’ll drag him into the thick of things, and he’ll be the one that’s hurt,” she pressed on and Ginny felt her chest tighten with a suspicion that was confirmed a moment later. “That Weasley girl will be in the middle of this conflict. She’s just like Lily, and you saw her with Harry today, just like I did. Don’t tell me you weren’t having flashbacks.”

So many thoughts coursed through Ginny’s mind right then that she barely caught hold of one. How odd that Tracy Merton, who was both a Gryffindor and in Harry’s mum’s year, should think that Ginny was like Lily, when Gertrude Wrightman was convinced they were opposites. Maybe it was just the red hair. Maybe that was why people associated them with each other.

Either way, Ginny had a hunch that Professor Wrightman had known Lily somewhat better than Andy’s aunt could ever claim to. She certainly knew Ginny better than this hard-hearted woman.

“You haven’t changed,” Mr. McGrath said. “All these years and you haven’t changed.”

“Neither, apparently, have you,” she replied, as if to scold him. “You’re still just as willing to watch those you love sacrifice themselves for nothing.”

“Fighting evil isn’t nothing.”

“They’re children.”

“As were we when this fight first began.” Matt looked broken hearted.

“I know you loved them,” Tracy said quietly. “I know that Christine meant everything to you, and I know you cared for Lily. But don’t let the memory of them blind you to the danger we’re facing now. People have already died. Children at this school have died.”

Faces flashed across Ginny’s mind—a third year boy in Ravenclaw who lost his parents that Christmas, a pair of twin boys that the Daily Prophet featured yesterday who had been killed.

“My sons are smart enough to make their own decisions,” Matt said, proud and tall. He must’ve made an excellent Head Boy.

“I don’t want to lose another family member,” Tracy said. “You and I have gone to too many funerals already. That’s why I came today. To ask you to leave with me.”

“Not Will?” Matt asked stiffly.

“Will won’t budge. Colleen lost her parents to Voldemort last time, and he still won’t—”

“And neither will I.”

“You’re fools,” Tracy said, crying and mad and so very weak.

“We’re trying to honor the dead, not hide from their memories,” Matt said.

They probably spoke more, but Ginny had heard enough to finally wrench herself away from the scene, blinking back tears that she

hated. She was awash with an overwhelming sense of responsibility and pride. She walked back to the common room, replaying the conversation in her head and hating Mrs. Merton and adoring Mr. McGrath more each time.

“Ginny!” cried the crowd in the common room when she walked in. She had forgotten about the party in the mess of eavesdropping, and was soon enveloped in hugs and celebratory toasts. She moved through it in a daze.

She left the party soon after, and when she reached her room, Ginny went to her trunk and pulled out the old yearbook photos that she had copied and planned to give to Harry at the Leaving Feast. 1977 had been an extraordinary year for Gryffindor. But as amazing as they may have been, what they became was hard to accept; no matter how heroic their deaths, how brilliant their lives, four were dead, one had run from the magical world, one had married a Death Eater, one was a Death Eater, and the last was a betrayed werewolf.

Ginny stayed there for a long moment, staring at the laughing group that looked so much like the partygoers she had just walked through. Would they too fall apart?

Tired and sore from the game, Ginny was going down to breakfast the next morning with Kerney, Andy, Stevie, Nadine, and Nadia when they came upon Andy’s dad in the front hall of the school. He was standing with Professor Wrightman, Theo, and Naomi, having what appeared to be a rather pleasant conversation.

“If we hadn’t known that Muffling spell in school, Prefect meetings might have involved half a dozen murders,” Matt was saying laughingly to Theo.

“Most of them at the hands of Head Girl Diane herself,” Wrightman replied lightly. “I heard that you and she did business a while ago.”

“Her husband is helping me establish the first Eyelopps in Japan,” Matt said. “It’s less exciting than you would imagine.”

"Your grandfather would be proud of you," Wrightman said. "The chain's doing extremely well."

"Thanks, no doubt, to this girl's father and uncle, the best managers around," Matt said, wrapping an arm around Naomi's shoulders. "They've been a blessing."

"Dad says it's easy to keep the shop running when everyone likes the owner so much," Naomi said, smiling and looking very lovely.

"That's because Matt's chronically social," Theo said. "He collects friends like germs."

"Whereas you try to frighten them all away with that scowl," Naomi said, the corners of her lips giving away her amusement as she poked her cheek lightly.

"You could benefit from working with a businessman like Mr. McGrath," Wrightman said to the Slytherin, who smiled wryly and shook his head. Ginny didn't remember her Defense professor ever looking so animated in the presence of another adult.

When Mr. McGrath noticed them, he brightened and called out to his sons.

"Hey Dad, I thought you left last night," Stevie said, grinning as he hugged his dad.

"I had some business with the Hogsmeade store and thought I'd come back to say a proper goodbye."

"We're going to see you in a couple of weeks," Andy said, smiling.

"Oh. I see. You're so old and grown up that you don't like seeing me anymore," Matt teased, only then glancing at Kerney and back at his son pointedly.

"Oh! Sorry, Dad. This is Kerney Scott," Andy said, nodding at his friend. "Kerney, this is my dad."

“Nice to meet you, Mr. McGrath,” Kerney said.

“I think I should go to breakfast now,” Professor Wrightman said, nodding at Matt pleasantly. “I’m sure I’ll see you soon, Matthew.”

But Matt McGrath wasn’t about to let her go so quickly. No, he surprised them all by smiling warmly and stepping forward as if to give her hug. Wrightman automatically stiffened at the gesture and took a small step back, causing Mr. McGrath to give her a look. Rather than take offense or be embarrassed, Andy’s dad took another step forward and embraced the little woman anyway.

“It was good to see you, Gertrude,” he said sincerely as he broke the hug.

She looked up at him with her pale blue eyes and fine features. “You as well. I’ll write you soon.”

“You better,” he said. “It’s been far too long.”

As her Defense professor left, Ginny paused for a moment to try to understand what had just happened. No one ever spoke that informally with Professor Wrightman.

“Believe it or not,” Matt said to his sons. “That woman was one of the reasons I survived after your mother died.”

“Professor Wrightman?” Stevie asked, mouth gaping.

“She liked your mother a great deal,” Matt said, smiling. “A lot of people did.”

The Ryan girls smiled, mentioning that their mother and father talked a lot about Christine, before Naomi ushered them into the Great Hall to give the McGraths some time alone. Theo led Ginny inside as well, where she took the chance to watch Gertrude Wrightman eating at the Staff table. Professor Sprout was chattering at her happily as she nodded and ate oatmeal.



Ginny decided that she liked the changes that came over her teacher when the woman's old schoolmates were around. She was starting to see how Sirius could have been attracted to her.

She was his opposite in every way, notwithstanding the hard-and-fast sense of loyalty instilled in them both. Where Sirius was outwardly brash and rebellious, only rarely slipping into the manners and proper decorum that had been ingrained in him during childhood, Gertrude Wrightman was the picture of contained and controlled self-possession, only rarely allowing a glimpse of raw emotion. But even with the family issues that divided them, Ginny knew now, after all she had seen, that Gertrude's feelings for Sirius had been—perhaps still were—as strong for him as his had been for her.

It was strangely comforting.

After breakfast, when all of her friends scrambled to go to class, Ginny found herself trying to figure out how to spend her morning. Harry, Ron, and Hermione hadn't come to breakfast, though that wasn't too rare, and Ginny had time to kill before her next lesson.

Just after she decided to read one of her lesson books outside, Ginny went into the Entrance Hall and found Mr. McGrath standing alone.

"Hello, Mr. McGrath," Ginny said, waving when he turned. "Couldn't bring yourself to leave yet?"

Mr. McGrath shook his head. "I have a meeting with Professor Sprout in an hour."

"Oh. That's nice." Ginny couldn't help but sound a little confused.

"It's for the animals in the Eeylops stores," Mr. McGrath explained. That made sense; He owned those stores. "Don't you have class with Andrew now?"

Ginny shook her head. "I'm not taking Care of Magical Creatures."

"I sort of pressured him into that one," Mr. McGrath said, looking a little guilty.

She waved that aside. "It's his favorite class."

"I'm glad."

Ginny paused, trying to decide if she should leave him alone, and decided against it. "You seem to know Professor Wrightman well."

"Yes. She's a good woman. Hard to get to know, though." Mr. McGrath seemed to consider Ginny very carefully as she nodded. "You seemed to know Theo well."

Ginny didn't know quite what to say about her friend who had just recently returned to school. "We work on potions together."

Mr. McGrath's eyes lightened. "Andrew mentioned that."

"It's interesting," Ginny offered, adjusting the shoulder strap of her bag. "Theo's a genius at it, but don't tell him that."

"I won't." The older man put his hands in his pockets and looked down the corridor before focusing on her again.

"I bet it's strange to be back."

"I haven't been here since my wife died. It holds a lot of memories for me."

Ginny looked at his sad, dark blue eyes set in his handsome face. He reminded Ginny of her mother during Christmas, when she hung old family ornaments. Voldemort had done this to them. Destroyed and hurt them through a war that had no point.

"I saw a picture of your wife in the old yearbooks in the library," Ginny said suddenly. "She was with Lily Potter and your sister."

"And Theo's mother, too, most likely." Matt's eyes shined with the memory. "They were inseparable for six years."

"They looked close," Ginny said, thinking of the funny picture of the four girls dressed up in Muggle Halloween costumes that had been randomly placed in the middle of the book. She wondered briefly what had broken up their bond after six years.

"It's odd to think that your friendship is the one thing that their sons all have in common," Mr. McGrath said, watching her. "Andrew told me that you introduced him to Harry."

"They're in different years, and Harry's best mates with my brother."

"In an ideal world, Harry would have spent Christmas at our house, and Theo would be—" Mr. McGrath cut himself off. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to ramble."

"It's all right," Ginny said quickly.

Mr. McGrath shook his head. "I appreciated the chance to talk with Harry more than you could imagine."

"You could write him, you know," Ginny said, thinking of the way that Harry didn't even look up when the owls arrived to deliver messages in the morning.

He looked sadder. "I might."

"Mr. McGrath, is everything all right?" she couldn't help asking. He appeared to shake himself out of his grave countenance at the concern in her voice. He considered her thoughtfully for a moment, until a small smile spread onto his face.

"Yes," he said after a moment, the smile extending a little further. "Yes, I believe it is." He extended his hand to shake hers. She took it with pleasure. "It was very nice to meet you."

"It was nice to meet you, too," she returned.

"Try to enjoy the holiday. I'm sure you'll love France if you give it a chance," he said with a sly smile as he turned to leave. The door had closed behind him before Ginny fully processed that he must know

about her staying with Wrightman over the break.

The lull that descended upon Hogwarts after the final Quidditch match was lightened only by the ever-improving weather. It was getting sunnier, and the rain was less biting each time it fell, but the pressure of impending O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams for the fifth- and seventh-years seemed to make all the other students grouchy and somewhat less cheerful than usual.

At least, that was the excuse that Ginny used when she and Kerney went to breakfast the Thursday before the O.W.L.s were supposed to begin.

"I'll be right back," she muttered to her friend, spotting Harry and Ron having a hushed conversation at the end of the table and making her way quickly over to them.

"Hey Harry," Ginny said. His head snapped up and eyes locked on hers. Ron had also turned to her, but Ginny was more curious about Harry. "I haven't talked to you in a while."

Harry was already picking up his bag. "I have to go to class."

Then he was walking purposefully away, and Ginny wanted to punch something. She had been trying to convince herself that Harry wasn't avoiding her, and it was very clear after that exchange that he was doing exactly that. Well, she thought, I won't let him. But her brother's arm blocked her path.

"Don't, Ginny," he said seriously, and it was his tone that made Ginny really look at her closest brother. His blue eyes looked pale and his face was drawn.

"Don't what?" she asked.

"Just let him go," he insisted. "Please."

It was the please that really unsettled her. Ronald Weasley never said 'please,' not to their mother or father, and especially not to his little sister.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Ron sighed, letting his arm drop as if the effort of keeping it aloft was too much, which seemed ridiculous; he was a Keeper. "Hermione's in the Hospital Wing."

"What?" Ginny's mouth fell open. How had she not heard that? "Is she okay? What happened?"

"A backfired spell," Ron said, looking particularly upset. "She'll be fine by tonight, but we're just all really busy."

"I'll go see her," Ginny offered.

"You can't. She's not allowed any visitors. No one's supposed to know she's even there," Ron said quietly, making Ginny try to think of the last time that she saw Hermione. It had been the Sunday after the game, at the D.A. meeting.

"How long has she been there?"

"A few days," Ron admitted, poking his food with his fork. Ginny sat on the bench beside him, facing the opposite way. No one was around; people always gave the Trio a wide berth.

"Oh, Ron, I'm so sorry," she said. "Are you okay?"

"Me?" Ron asked scornfully. "I'm fine. Just my best mate who's hurt."

Even in the midst of this conversation, it took a moment to realize that he was talking about Hermione.

"Ron—"

"Ginny," he said suddenly, overwhelming what she had planned to say with his insistent voice, "Hermione and I signed up for this. And

Harry hates it when we're hurt, blames himself even though we chose to go with him. Stupid git. And I know you'll probably hex me for saying this, but you should stay away from this. All of it."

Her tall brother left the table before Ginny could protest, which was probably best since she was absolutely fuming. She was even angrier when she made her way to the Hospital Wing and saw that Hermione was in an isolation room in the back, that Pomfrey quickly blocked and said was empty.

So Ginny trudged to her Transfiguration class, completely preoccupied throughout the lesson, wondering what spell could have hurt Hermione. It wasn't until the end of Defense class that Ginny was pulled from her thoughts when Wrightman asked her to stay.

"Your paperwork has been approved by the Ministry and the Director of the Department of Mysteries."

Ginny smiled, glad to hear some good news to distract her; as the end of term drew closer, she felt more and more excited about working at the DoM. "That good."

"I wanted to explain the arrangements for transportation to my house at the end of term," Wrightman said, handing Ginny a scroll.

"Okay." It unraveled to reveal a list of instructions and procedures that Ginny quickly scanned.

"Due to security concerns, the Seventh Year Ball will be held at one of my summer homes," Wrightman said, nodding at the parchment. Ginny unrolled it further to discover a picture of a gorgeous home on a lake.

"At your house?" Ginny couldn't help but ask.

"Yes."

"Why?" Ginny asked.

"I volunteered it." Wrightman was always so succinct with answers.

"That was nice of you," Ginny replied wryly.

"It was necessary," came the response.

"Since when?"

Wrightman's tense posture never faltered. "Since Miss Bell decided to invite Harry Potter."

Ginny good mood instantly evaporated; she had heard about the date through the Hogwarts rumor mill, and been irrationally mad at both of her teammates ever since then, even knowing that Katie only asked Harry after she found her boyfriend cheating and needed a last minute replacement. And it was all before he kissed Ginny. But the fact that it was one more thing that she couldn't talk to him about now grated on her nerves.

"And that's a problem?"

"Don't act dim. You know that his presence changes the Ball." She gave Ginny an appraising glance. "Having the Ball on one of my family properties means we can key you into the estates that day." Ginny's eyebrows rose. "All of my homes have a system ward that accepts only keyed Portkeys. You will need to bring me your trunk and all of your belongings the morning of the Ball so I can have them brought to my home. You will Portkey there directly from the Ball."

"Okay," Ginny replied, trying to think of how much she would have to pack. "Is there anything else?"

"No. Just be sure to have your trunk here by ten o'clock that morning."

Ginny nodded her agreement. "Thank you, Professor."

Having finished her Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology, Astronomy, Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and History O.W.L.s, Ginny was now sitting with a large group of very weary, very cranky fifth years, attempting to lead a Potions revision session with Devon.

“Why should I care about the water temperature?” Othello snapped, tossing his book on the ground. “I’m just going to fail this like every other bloody O.W.L. I’ve taken.”

“The water temperature regulates the absorption rate,” Devon said calmly, looking over her notes.

“Why aren’t I dead yet?” moaned a particularly tired-looking Tela Rogers from Ravenclaw.

“I’m more worried about Defense. Do you think we need to know those mutating shields? You think they’ll attack us?” Nadine asked in an uncharacteristically panicked voice.

“Calm down, Nadine,” Andy said, as calm as ever.

“Oh, shut up, McGrath,” Nadine snapped. “Not all of us will inherit a job! These tests actually matter to us!”

His yes narrowed. “Stop being a bitch.”

“Stop being a moron.”

Their fight digressed from there, leaving Ginny wondering about the exact state of their current relationship. She couldn’t believe she didn’t know that.

“Well,” Devon said, closing her book and standing. “This was not our best revision session.”

The uproar was instantaneous and loud:

“We aren’t done!”

“We can’t be done!”

“I’m going to melt my cauldron!”

“I’M GOING TO FAIL!”



The panic surrounding the exams had been taking its toll for weeks, but with only two exams left (three for those in Divination and Muggle Studies), people were starting to really doubt themselves. They weren't getting anything out of this session, and Ginny thought Devon was right to end it. She also thought that people needed to calm the hell down, but that was a completely separate issue. Somehow, Ginny seemed to have adopted Bill's attitude toward exams: a necessary evil, but one that wasn't the most important thing in the world.

"Do you want to work on Defense now?" Kerney asked Ginny, books and notes in hand.

"Maybe later," Ginny said, stretching. "I'm going to stick around here for a bit. I think Luna would work with you, though."

Kerney paused.

"Or Nadine and Andy," Ginny teased. "They looked really ready to keep on pleasantly studying."

"Maybe," Kerney said, not even smiling at the old joke.

"What's up with them anyway?" Ginny asked.

"Andy and Nadine?" the Kernel asked, clearly surprised by the question. "They've been dating for a month."

"Really? Officially?"

"Unless calling each other their boyfriend and girlfriend has an unofficial connotation, yes," Kerney said.

"And they're still at each other's throats. Huh," Ginny said.

Kerney gave Ginny a long, strange look before saying, "I'll see you in the common room," and leaving.

After all the other students stumbled, shuffled, and ran out of the classroom where they had set up the revision, Ginny turned to Devon and said, "That was fun."

Devon made a non-committal noise, Summoning all of her things and carefully putting them in her bag.

"I wanted to thank you for how you've handled things with Theo. You've been honest," Devon said, thin and beautiful and achingly honest. "He's coming to pick me up in a few minutes."

"I tried." Tried to let him be enough for her, tried to like him more than Harry. Tried and failed. So then she tried to make it very clear that friendship was all she currently had to offer.

"I know." Devon focused on her. "He's going to the Seventh Year Ball with Gretchen Ramsey."

"Oh," Ginny said, surprised that Devon would mention this.

"He is the only person who could ask me not to be your Potions partner next year who I would listen to," Devon said, "and I've enjoyed working with you thus far, so try not to alienate him."

Not too sure if she was joking or not, Ginny nodded again. "I've enjoyed working with you both."

And in the bright evening light of early summer, the door opened and dark, mysterious Theo Nott stepped inside.

"Done already?" Theo asked, glancing around the empty room.

"Yes."

"You sound happy," he said teasingly.

Devon gave him a look out of the corner of her eye.

"Okay. You don't want to talk about it." He put up his hands in defeat. "I can't wait for your O.W.L.s to be over."

"It'll certainly be a relief," Ginny said, glancing around to make sure she hadn't left anything behind.

"I'm beginning to brew the final potion for my project tonight," he said, Devon standing beside him, watching his face.

That was so exciting. "Were the modifications helpful?"

"Slightly." He shrugged. "I'll work more on it over the break."

"Need any help?"

He took the books from Devon's hands. "I have my Astronomy exam tomorrow night. Could you check the potion without adding anything too stupid or making it implode?"

Ginny pulled a face. "Yes, I think I could manage that."

"Good," he said, nodding as he opened the door for Devon. "I'll check to make sure the next morning."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Fine. See you both later."

Devon gave a wave and the pair of Slytherins left together, as Theo glanced down at her. "I took care of your pest problem, by the way."

"Thank you." Devon sounded very pleased.

"Not a problem," he said as they walked down the corridor. "You should have come to me earlier."

"I came when it was necessary."

He laughed and the rest of their conversation faded into incoherent murmurs as Ginny stood in the doorway, suddenly missing Andy.

The fifth year Gryffindor girls' room looked very clean. Well, it was always clean, since the girls who lived there were naturally organized, but with most of their trunks packed, the place looked almost bereft,

missing all the pictures on desks and knickknacks that normally adorned bedposts and bathroom counters. In fact, the room looked a little lonely when Ginny sat on her bed the night, glad that only Kerney was there.

“Awful day, wasn’t it?” Ginny said.

“A bit like being held under water by a swamp creature,” Kerney said, folding a sweater and laying it neatly on the pile she was creating.

“That’s very descriptive,” Ginny said, rolling over onto her back.

“Well, since I have to drag everything out of you, I thought I should put forth double the effort to be open,” Kerney said, pushing the pile of clothes down to make them more compact.

“What’s that mean?” Ginny asked, propping herself up on her elbows to watch her friend pause in her careful packing procedure to look over at Ginny across her bed.

“It means that you never tell me everything about a situation,” Kerney said simply. The Kernel was always brutally honest.

“I tell you most things. In fact, you’re normally the first I tell,” Ginny said, hurt and surprised by Kerney’s tone, which made her sit up.

“I heard you’re going to the Seventh Year Ball with Baron Ramsey tomorrow night,” Kerney said.

Ginny paused, thrown for a loop. “I told you that.”

“No,” Kerney said, going back to her tightly folded clothes. “You didn’t.”

“I thought I did,” Ginny said, trying to remember. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“Of course it is,” Kerney said. “This is just like with Theo and Andy.”

Confused, Ginny sat on the edge of her bed, watching her friend clench her jaw. "What do they have to do with anything?"

Kerney finally looked up to give Ginny an exasperated look. "You don't really know any of your friends. You don't let yourself."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Having not anticipated this response at all, Ginny's tone was rather harsh.

Kerney, her prefect badge still pinned on her chest and hair tucked behind both ears, said, "You cycle through friends to keep them at a distance, pushing them away when they get too close."

"I do not." Ginny felt like she was being attacked.

Kerney gave her a look. "Every year you've had a different group. It was Michael Corner and his mates last year. The year before it was Neville Longbottom. Before that Tela Rogers. Before that—"

"So what? You don't like that I have a lot of friends? I should apologize for being social?" Ginny asked caustically, her friend's words hitting too close to the truth.

"Andy is the only real exception," Kerney continued as if Ginny hadn't spoken, folding shirt quickly. "He's been your friend for years, but that only proves how much you keep your friends at bay."

Among other things, Ginny wanted her friend to stop compulsively organizing her clothing. "Andy's one of my best mates. And so are you."

"I know," Kerney said, lifting her brown eyes to meet Ginny's, "but you didn't even know he was dating Nadine."

Okay. That had been shocking. "I knew they were heading in that direction."

"A blind house-elf could have known that," Kerney said, looking up. "You're supposed to be his closest friend. Hell, you're the only reason that he and I are friends."

"I've been preoccupied."

"Moving on to new friends," Kerney corrected. "You've been preoccupied with trying to find a new group that didn't know you well, who wouldn't make you feel threatened."

Ginny stood. "That's not true!"

"How are things going with Harry?" Kerney asked, catching Ginny off guard. "Still fighting?"

"What? No. We're just—It's complicated," Ginny said.

"And that's all you'll ever tell me." The girl looked fierce and confident. "You don't volunteer information about yourself ever. And you keep your friends at a distance to ensure they don't make you feel guilty about not opening up to them, like you're doing with Andy."

"What, suddenly you're analyzing my psyche?" Ginny bit out.

Kerney's arms fell to her sides. "Andy's been your friend for five years, but I bet you've never asked him how his mother died. You didn't even bloody know that he and Theo are practically as close as brothers."

"They weren't exactly broadcasting that information!" Ginny snapped.

"They weren't keeping it a secret either! They talked in the corridors and sometimes even showed up to King's Cross together. And Andy was the one who said you'd enjoy your date with Theo. You just never noticed." Each word was drawn out of the last part. "You never asked him about his home life because you didn't want him asking about yours."

"I have nothing to hide about my home life," Ginny said.

"But you won't let your friends visit ever. Because for some reason, that feels too personal to you or something. Andy's never even met your parents."

"Our life changed when my brother became best mates with the Boy-Who-Lived," Ginny snapped, not even realizing how true it was until this moment. "Wards were placed on our house for him to visit, Aurors performed random sweeps." Not to mention the Order. "Bringing a stranger over became too complicated."

"Then what's the excuse for not visiting us?" Kerney asked, hands on her hips. "I asked you to come to my dad's last August, and you said you couldn't."

"I couldn't," Ginny insisted.

Kerney just stared. "What happened to you that made you so terrified of opening up to people? Why is it that you can't trust anyone?"

Thoughts of Tom Riddle's diary flashed through Ginny's head before she could properly squash them. "Nothing."

"And that," Kerney said, pointing angrily at her. "Lying. You lie all the time. Constantly. Lie about feeling fine, lie about not caring when a bloody survey objectifies and horrifies you, lie about school and secret meetings with professors. And you just expect us all to think it's fine. That you're fine."

"I am fine."

"You are not," Kerney said. "You're broken. And you have been for years."

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm not broken!" Ginny snapped. "Where did this come from?"

"It came from watching you start your new cycle of friends with Devon Pearce, and not wanting you to just run away again."

"I'm not running away from anything!"

"You have mates in every house and almost every year." Kerney laid both hands flatly on her pile of clothes. "You have Quidditch friends,

family friends, class friends, and friends-of-the-moment. You flit between compartments on the train and feel comfortable because you know everyone and you can talk to anyone. But when those friends get too close, you leave them to find someone else, like you did with Michael.”

Ginny’s hand cut through the air. “Michael has nothing to do with this.”

“He said he loved you, and you broke up with him,” Kerney said, reminding Ginny that Kerney was definitely her most observant friend, and the one most likely not to let Ginny get away with anything. “You told everyone he left you, but you pushed him away.”

Ginny didn’t want to talk about this. “We weren’t that serious. He freaked me out, and has proven what a jerk he can be.”

“He wanted to know you, and you don’t like it when people do that,” Kerney said bluntly.

Ginny slapped her hands down. “You know me.”

“Where do you spend your summer holidays, Ginny? Your Christmas?” Kerney asked, looking a bit sad as she said it. “Our owls return unopened. Letters sealed, birds confused.”

“My family—” Ginny couldn’t explain. “It’s complicated.”

Kerney’s mouth set. “What happened first year?”

“You know what happened.” A lie.

“No,” Kerney said. “You never trusted us enough to tell us. You waited two years to tell us that Sirius Black was wrongfully convicted, but couldn’t tell us how you knew that. And then last year, as you and I grew close, you joined a secret club and disappeared before the end of the term, but never mentioned it.”



Ginny's heart broke a little more with each comment, and she wanted to lash out, to use the magic now swirling inside her to break something.

"You're the most secretive person I know; I'm not condemning you for it," Kerney said. "I knew who you were when we became friends. I know it now. But today, for the first time, it occurred to me that you can't see yourself very clearly."

"And that's why you're attacking me?"

"I'm not attacking you," Kerney said. "But I'm not going to sit by and watch you think that you're fine. You're not."

"I am," Ginny insisted.

"You're starting a new cycle with the Slytherins, and I know people like Devon Pearce and Theo Nott; they aren't the type to ever push you to open up, Ginny. In fact, with them I worry that you might freeze out the world altogether," Kerney said. "I won't let you, if I can help it."

"I won't. I'm not."

"Find someone to trust," Kerney entreated. "Trust someone."

Ginny ached to tell Kerney about Harry, about hours spent lying with one another in the Room of Requirement and flying for hours, about feeling comfortable at last. But she couldn't, because it was one more complicated thing that Ginny wasn't allowed to share, and for the first time in a long time, Ginny felt young and vulnerable and quite alone.

After a long, mostly sleepless night, Ginny went mechanically through the day, trying to smile or laugh appropriately. She probably didn't do a very good job, but didn't care much.

The night took an interesting turn when Ginny went to the dungeon to check on the potion that Theo was brewing as the final batch. It was fine—a nice orange color that would slowly become bright pink as the cauldron cooled.

On her way back to the common room, Ginny tried not to dwell on Harry, which made her grin stupidly to herself, or the current nature of their relationship, which made her uncomfortable. She was distracted from her train of thought by a pale, elegant bloke stepping into the corridor in front of her, just under the flickering torches on the wall.

“Are you trying to be creepy or does it come naturally?” she asked, instantly recognizing Draco Malfoy even in the dim light.

“You’re growing bold in the dungeons,” Draco said

“It’s the pleasant decor,” Ginny said hollowly. “Damp walls and torch light in narrow corridors screams ‘welcome’ to me.”

“I’ve watched you this year, little Weasley,” Draco said, and his eyes looked like they were burning as he stared at her. “Cavorting with the best of my house, my friends.”

“Your games are growing tiresome, Malfoy.” Ginny had dealt with him before and learned that dismissing him was usually the best way to win.

“As are yours. You have no place beside Nott or Ramsey,” he said, “and certainly not Pearce.”

“My friends are my business,” Ginny snapped, her emotions still raw from the fight with Kerney.

Draco Malfoy watched her with his cold grey eyes. “Do your new friends know that you live in the summer locked up tight in Grimmauld Place?”

Hearing him speak the headquarters’ name jolted Ginny for a moment, before she remembered that Tonks had brought him there at the end of the holiday, for protection.

“You’re one to talk. Do your friends know you hide out with your half-blood cousin?” she asked, revving up for a full blown fight. It would probably feel good to scream at someone she really loathed.

“I’m protecting myself. Something you’d do well to attempt,” he replied, colder than before, but still not quite able to sound as haughty and dangerous as he had in the past.

“Oh, yes,” Ginny said, remembering Andy’s aunt Tracy Merton saying something similar to her brother. “Only I’m not cowardly enough to run from this fight, Malfoy.”

“If you were smart, you would.”

“Like you?”

“You’re a fool to think I could,” Malfoy said, and suddenly he looked impossibly tired, this immaculate wizard. Bags lined under his weary, desperate eyes and his flawless skin looked suddenly hollow. “The whole lot of you deserves to lose.”

The lack of rancor in his voice surprised her. He sounded simply disgusted and drained.

“Go to sleep, Malfoy,” Ginny said, preparing to leave. “You looked tired.”

He took a step forward, invading her personal space as he grew animated, and she refused to back up. “Put the pieces together, Weasley. That house is mine by blood.”

“We already discussed that. It’s Harry’s.”

“And you ignored the obvious,” he said, grabbing her upper arm. “I am a Black.”

She pulled away and drew her wand. “You’re bound by an oath of secrecy.”

“The house recognized my blood,” he said, looking at her so intently. “The blood of my family and all its many connections.”

“What are you saying?” she asked.

He opened his mouth and made a little choking sound, glaring at her, then barked, "Put it together, Weasley."

She Transfigured his shoes into lead and left him yelling after her, trying not to hear the echo of his voice as she headed to her last D.A. meeting.

Maybe it was because her emotions were running high after her fight with Kerney last night, maybe it was the onset of exhaustion, but after the meeting—which Hermione attended, looking pale but determined—Ginny grabbed Harry's hand and dragged him from the room, down a corridor, and into an empty classroom.

"You've been avoiding me," she began once she released him.

Looking rather uncomfortable, Harry put his hands in his pockets and said, "No, I haven't."

"Yes, you have. You've practically run away when I sit at the same table as you and avoid being alone with me constantly," she said, hurt and hiding it as best she could. Harry still winced. "Are we ever going to talk about the fact that you kissed me?"

"It's late," Harry said, motioning toward the door. "We can talk later."

"No. We can't," Ginny said, irritated and sad and a dozen other emotions that she was trying to control. "You won't let that happen."

"Yes, I will."

"Liar," she said, before her resolve cracked a bit. "If you think kissing me was a mistake, just say so, don't—"

He looked shocked. "Of course it wasn't a mistake."

Ginny was so confused. "Then why—"

"I can't start dating you right now," Harry said plaintively, eyes roaming over her features. "As much as I might want to, I can't."

“Why not?” she asked, wishing she could understand him even briefly.

“For one thing, you’re leaving tomorrow to live in France for four months,” Harry pointed out, which was irritatingly rational.

Ginny’s hands curled into fists. “Then you shouldn’t have kissed me, if all you were going to do was—”

“How could I not?” he asked softly, watching her intently. “I’ve wanted to kiss you for months now.”

A flush spread through her, half in anger half in pleasure. “But you waited?”

“You were dating other people,” he said.

“Hmph.” Okay. Another reasonable point. She felt like she was losing her footing and needed to refocus. “You still should have talked to me. And you shouldn’t have avoided me.”

“I had to,” Harry said, taking two slow steps toward her. “Because every time I’m in the same room with you, all I can think about is kissing you again.”

He was practically on top of her when he cupped his hand on the back of her neck and kissed her languorously. While Ginny would never call herself an expert at snogging, she did have a bit of experience, and all of it paled in comparison to the way Harry kissed her, gently opening her mouth to deepen the kiss, and stealing her breath away.

“That isn’t fair,” Ginny breathed when they parted, tingling. “How am I supposed to yell at you after that?”

“How am I supposed to not kiss you?” Harry asked; sadness tinged in his eyes.

“Harry, what the hell is going on?” None of this was making any sense to her.

His entire face changed, looking both desperately sad and resolved. "There are things I have to do, and I can't do them while I'm worrying about you."

"I can take care of myself. You don't have to worry about me," she said, annoyed.

"It's all I can seem to do lately," Harry said, looking frustrated and old, "and if I'm not careful, that's going to put me and Ron and Hermione in a lot of danger."

Again with the vague sentiments. "Harry, what are you talking about?"

His green eyes swept over her face. "I have to do something, something that's going to take up all of my energy and focus. And it makes me glad to know you'll be with Wrightman in France, away from the war."

"I won't be away from it," Ginny said angrily. "The whole reason I'm going is to help you. To see why the hell these memories won't leave me alone."

She hadn't meant to say the last part.

"What do you mean the memories won't leave you?" he asked, sounding alarmed.

"It means that I have something in my head that might or might not try to kill you one day, and it's growing," Ginny said meanly. "You remember my dreams, don't you? The ones that landed me in the Hospital Wing? Turns out it wasn't just random. It was Tom's memories coming back."

"His memories?" Harry repeated, looking increasingly worried. "From the diary?"

"Where else?"

"I asked you if you remembered anything."

“And I told you I did!”

“You didn’t tell me that you thought it was getting stronger.”

Ginny clenched her teeth. “It’s not.”

He clearly did not believe her. “You need to talk to Dumbledore.”

“I need to talk to you,” she practically yelled, waving her arms in his direction. “I need to know what happened between the day you kissed me and now. You weren’t avoiding me at the Quidditch match, so what made you suddenly decide you needed to stay away?”

“You need to talk to Dumbledore,” Harry said again, taking her arm, which she wrenched away from him.

“He already knows. I talked to him about the apprenticeship with Wrightman,” she said, furious that he wouldn’t have a normal conversation. “What changed your mind about us?”

He scowled. “Nothing.”

He was such an awful liar, and that just made the situation more frustrating. Why would he feel the need to lie? She could figure this out. She could. And a second later, when the answer came to her, Ginny was pissed.

“Voldemort did something, didn’t he?” she asked. From his shocked expression, it was pretty clear she was dead on. “So what was it? A vision like the one from last year? A letter?”

His jaw tightened. “No.”

They were the only two people in the world who knew Voldemort, really knew him, knew what he thought, how his mind worked. He would try to unsettle Harry now, upset him and put him off balance.

“Hermione,” Ginny said, suddenly positive. “Whatever happened to her shook you.”

Harry's eyes shifted away to the wall, and his entire body tensed.

"That's not a reason to hide," Ginny said. "Not from me."

His posture straightened and he said in a cold voice, "I'll see you at the Ball, Ginny."

"Don't," Ginny said, snatching his wrist.

"Ginny," he said, looking painfully direct, "I need you to be safe. I need to know that even if I don't manage the impossible and end this bloody fight, that you will be okay. And kissing you right now, dating you, would only put you in danger. Make it that much more likely that it will be you next time in the hospital bed, bleeding and unconscious."

That was ridiculous. "You can't protect everyone all the time."

"But I can try to keep you out of this," he said sourly.

"I don't want to be out of this if it means being away from you," she said honestly.

"So you want a charred black hand like Dumbledore? You want a gaping hole in your stomach like Hermione?" he asked bitingly. "Please, tell me what part of this you want."

"I want the part that includes you," she said fiercely. "I want to help."

He exhaled loudly, taking half a minute to look past her before refocusing. "I need you safe to keep me from thinking that this is the end of my life, what I'm about to start."

"It won't be the end," she insisted.

"You being safe and away from danger will help me believe that."

"That isn't fair."



"No, it's not. It's awful. Almost as awful as the fact that my two best friends are going to come with me," he said. "But I won't risk you."

Ginny felt like she had been punched in the stomach. "You'll risk my brother?"

"He didn't give me a choice," Harry said, sounding torn between confused and glad. The loyalty in the Trio was deep and abiding, and Harry still didn't understand that.

"So you're just going to forget me."

"No. Never. I couldn't," he said, quiet and sincere. "I don't know if you really know what you've meant to me this year. When I'm talking to you, you make me feel like I could be normal, like I could have a life after Voldemort that isn't just about killing or surviving. Flying with you, laughing with you, talking to you, those memories make me human." He rubbed his thumb across her cheekbone.

"Harry, if your gift really is love, why are you trying to avoid feeling anything for me?" she asked, sounding so pathetic that she wanted to snatch back the words but refused.

"I'm not avoiding feeling anything for you," he said quietly. "I accepted a while ago how much you mean to me. It's why I need you safe. Because it would kill me to lose you now, just after I finally kissed you."

"Which took you forever," she muttered stupidly in the face of his words

"Yes, it did," he said with a tight smile. Kissing her once, quickly. "Be safe, for me."

And then he was gone, and all Ginny wanted to do was curl up in a ball and cry.

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Author's Note: I know a lot of you have been pretty upset with Ginny for a while now. Hopefully this cleared up some of her decisions. Unfortunately, I'm afraid you may hate many, many characters after this chapter too. However, I hope that you liked seeing the grown ups from Prelude enough to distract many of you. I know I enjoyed writing them – Miranda

## CHAPTER 14

### Throwing Down the Gauntlet

All dressed up in her lovely blue dress robes, hair twisted in an elaborate up-do with orchids weaved in, Ginny stood in the entrance to the Ballroom and let herself appreciate Gertrude Wrightman's winter home.

A full orchestra lining the back wall played soft classical music as the students arrived. Small, round tables with clean white tablecloths were spread around the room with brightly colored dishes, glasses, and silverware that made the room look young. Soft white light lit the room from above and all seven double doors for the room were wide open. But the thing that caught Ginny's attention was the large bay windows that occupied the far side of the room looked out over a glittering pond with a delicate waterfall in the middle of the garden, where fairies twinkles briefly between the hedges and roses bloomed.

It was like stepping into a fairytale land and feeling much like a princess.

"You look lovely, Ginevra," Baron Ramsey said, walking up in his crisp dress robes, looking every bit like the head of a pureblood family, not to mention very, very delicious. Dress robes enhanced Baron Ramsey, who looked so very handsome normally, making him almost distractingly good looking.

"Thank you," she said, smiling. It had been a long couple of days, and despite liking Baron platonically, she wished she could have avoided this entire Ball, but it was always nice to be complimented. "Professor Wrightman's house elves helped a lot."

"They had a lot to work with," he said, extending his arm for her to take.

Baron had been very understanding when she had informed him that she would be required to arrive separately from the other students, who were appearing in pairs, holding their gold nameplates as Portkeys.

“Was your trip alright?” Baron asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Ginny said automatically, thinking of the hectic morning as she had brought her trunk to Wrightman’s office and been escorted to her home, keyed into the wards, and led away by one of the many Wrightman house elves to prepare for the Ball. “Sorry you had to arrive alone.”

“I didn’t mind,” he said. “My sister and Theodore were good company.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Ginny said, letting him lead her through the students as they found their seats and settled in at the tables. She tried to pretend to herself that she wasn’t looking for Harry, but she was never very good at self-delusion.

“Our table is in the middle of the room,” he said, motioning to the beautiful circular table near the dance floor, where Theo, Gretchen, and another couple were already chatting.

“The room is really beautiful,” Ginny said, tilting her head back to really examine the pastel-colored frescos of angels that covered the ceiling.

“All of Professor Wrightman’s homes are exquisite,” Baron said, making Ginny wonder if everyone knew that this was their Defense professor’s home or if Baron recognized it because he had visited. She asked him as they made their way over to the table.

“Both, actually. I’ve been here before for a couple of functions, but we were told that the event would happen at one of her homes a few days ago.” Baron looked at ease with this fact, so Ginny supposed it wasn’t that big a deal.

“‘Home’ isn’t really the word I’d use to describe this place.” Despite the fact that Ginny had seen a picture, her first impression of the mansion was still awe. Ginny was beginning to wonder what exactly was in store for her that summer.

"It's not the word Professor Wrightman chooses either. She prefers estate," Baron said, his lips twitching at the ends. Ginny smiled, amused. They arrived at their table a moment later.

"There she is," Theo said, standing along with the other bloke at the table. "Ginny's such a big deal that she arrived with the hostess, you know."

"Technically, Professor Wrightman isn't the hostess," Gretchen said with a smile, welcoming Ginny. "Hogwarts is."

Baron pulled out Ginny's chair, and everyone sat after she was introduced to the anonymous couple—Marie Moulin and Gregory Rector.

"Like Hogwarts could afford the Viennese Symphony," Theo said, shaking his head. "Professor Wrightman is running this event."

"Of course she is," Gretchen said. "It's in her home."

Sitting with Baron and the rest of the Slytherins, Ginny noticed that Olivia Flint was at the Ball as well, glaring at her from several tables over. Her date was a Slytherin seventh-year that Ginny didn't recognize. Ginny felt a fleeting pleasure at knowing her date was far more handsome.

"Flint still hates you?" Gretchen asked, noticing where Ginny was looking.

"She always has. Don't know why she'd stop now," Ginny said, turning her attention back to the table.

"Sure, but ever since that fight with you, she's been out for your blood," Theo said, glancing casually at Olivia.

"I hadn't noticed an increase in hostility," Ginny said truthfully, thinking over the past few months.

"After Professor Wrightman gave her three detentions and took away forty points for her behavior," Gretchen said. "Flint was furious."

Ginny was surprised. "I lost forty points, too, but I didn't have any detentions."

"Professor Wrightman is rather strict about Slytherins upholding a certain level of honor," Baron said simply. Ginny acknowledged inwardly that the professor probably would have given her a detention if they hadn't gotten into their screaming fight, but that still didn't make sense as to why she would have given Olivia five detentions. Five seemed excessive even by Snape's standards.

"She may not be our head of house, but she has helped change our house for the better this year, in the younger years especially," Gretchen said, glancing at the woman herself as she swept through the room in her shimmering silver robes. Wrightman's hair was down and curled, but she still looked intimidating.

The room they were in had a higher ceiling, it felt like, than the Great Hall. The house-elves in their little uniforms were barely visible, though there seemed to be a dozen of them. The china and even the silverware at the Slytherin tables were decorated lightly in dark green, though there was a bit of inlaid gold that was subtle enough not to be ostentatious.

"She's really something, isn't she?" Ginny asked rhetorically, picking up her fork and resting it in her hand the way she held her wand. Dinner wouldn't be served for a short while so they had some time to chat, and quite a few people came over to say hello to them, mostly seventh years who knew Baron and Gretchen.

Absently fingering her glass, Ginny's mind wandered away from the conversation to one she had had earlier that day.

Andy had jogged up to Ginny when he saw her floating her trunk through the common room. Ginny had thought she had gotten up early enough to avoid being seen, but both Andy and Kerney were there. They quickly joined Ginny on her walk to Wrightman's office.

"So you're leaving us for good today?" Andy asked.

Ginny shook her head. "Not for good. Just the summer."

"That's still a long time," Andy said.

The statement was alarmingly true, so Ginny tried to push it out of her mind. "I'm sure you won't notice."

"We will," Kerney said seriously, making Ginny turn to her friend.

"I'm going to miss you both a lot," Ginny said, watching her two closest friends.

Andy smiled his heart-breaking smile. "We will, too, Ginny."

"But you'll have a good time at the Ball with Baron," Kerney said. "Luna's going too, so now I wish I were." Kerney found Luna to be one of the most amusing people, and often told Ginny that she could spend all day just watching Luna interact with unsuspecting people.

"Who's her date?" Ginny asked, surprised not to have known that Luna was going.

"That you'll never believe," Andy said, chuckling.

"Kerney?" Ginny asked. She always answered questions directly.

"Thomas de Vale," Kerney said, making Ginny's mouth drop open. Thomas was a Ravenclaw, and a good friend of Baron's. A serious bloke with impeccable manners. "He said he thinks she's interesting."

"Because she is," Ginny said, happy to know that her good friend would be there. Of course, she had another good friend who would be there, but he was too busy pushing her away to be much of a comfort.

"Be safe," Andy said, giving her a hug when they reached the office. "Write if you can. I'll be in Italy for a month or so in July."

Tucking her head against his shoulder, she held him tightly. "Good. I will."

He left to give the girls space to say their goodbyes, and the fight between Kerney and Ginny remained between them, awkward and obtrusive. Normally, Ginny would have ignored the issue, or waited for the other person to bring it up, but that was exactly the sort of thing Kerney had said was wrong.

"Kerney," Ginny began, "I never meant to make you feel like I was replacing you."

Kerney nodded. "I know."

But that didn't seem to clear anything up, and it was just so frustrating. "You and Luna are my closest girlfriends, and I am going through a lot right now that I don't even know how to talk about. But I want to. With you."

"But you won't," Kerney said sadly.

"I want to."

"Maybe someday you'll be able to, and I'll be here, ready to listen," Kerney assured her.

Ginny blinked, lowering her eyes to the ground. "Thank you."

Kerney wrapped Ginny up in her arms. "You deserve to be happy."

Trying desperately not to cry, Ginny just shook her head, thinking of Riddle and her awful, haunting dreams where she had cast Unforgivables so easily.

"I'm sorry I've been such a rotten friend to you this year," Ginny said.

"You weren't rotten. Busy, absentminded, and distracted, yes, but not rotten," Kerney said easily.

Ginny smiled. "Thanks."



"I'll see you in September," Kerney assured her, and the promise was there: when Ginny was ready, Kerney would listen.

"Hey, Ginny," a voice said, pulling Ginny from her thoughts as a hand rested on her shoulder. She turned and found Roman Keselica standing behind her, smiling. As she twisted to stand and face the Ravenclaw Keeper, Theo caught Ginny's eye and smirked. She knew exactly what he was thinking: that Roman was one of the people that Devon had approved for Ginny. How embarrassing. Ginny was surprised to see Lavender Brown standing beside Roman, looking rather happy.

"Hey Lavender," Ginny greeted with a smile.

"No comments about consorting with the enemy?" Roman jested.

Ginny grinned. "We beat you. If we'd lost, it would've been a whole different story."

Lavender laughed softly, batting her eyes at Roman, and if Ginny hadn't known the girl so well, she would have thought she was ridiculous. But after spending two years in the D.A. with Lavender, she also knew the girl was a formidable fighter, strong and brave and beginning to accept the responsibility that came with war.

"Are you having a good time at the Ravenclaw table?" Ginny asked Lavender. A look crossed Roman's face at that and Lavender's smile became forced. Ginny began to think she knew why they'd decided to roam the room.

"It's fun, but we really just wanted to dance," Lavender said easily, but Ginny heard the lie.

"You can always join us," Ginny said impulsively.

Lavender wrapped her arm through Roman's. "We'll be okay."

"I saw you and wanted to stop by to say goodbye," Roman said easily. It hit Ginny that this was the last time her seventh years friends who

return to Hogwarts, and they couldn't even make plans to meet up during the summer because Ginny would be sequestered in France. Not that you ever make summer plans, accused a voice in Ginny's head that sounded suspiciously like Kerney.

"It's just the beginning of the night," Ginny said, mentally shaking off that thought. "We can say goodbye later."

Lavender giggled and agreed, tugging him off to go say hi to others.

"I wish so much that I could be there when he introduces Brown to his sister," Gretchen said after they'd left.

Theo smirked. "I'd pay to watch that."

"Why? Lavender's not going to attack the girl or anything," Ginny said.

"No, but Brown has that stupid bimbo act down perfectly. She'll pretend not to know that she's being insulted by Roman's sister, who will not appreciate that," Gretchen said with a smile.

"Leticia may meet her match in a Gryffindor," Marie said, looking amused. "Who would have guessed it?"

"We have a Gryffindor at the table," Baron said pointedly.

Marie waved her delicate hand. "Ginevra Weasley is a completely different story. Brown is a silly little girl."

Not really knowing how to take the first part of that statement, Ginny said, "Lavender's a good friend of mine."

Marie cocked an eyebrow. "Really?"

Gregory put his hand on her arm, and they shared a look before the girl glanced at Baron and nodded.

"I didn't mean to be rude," Marie said to Ginny. "Sorry."

The insincerity rankled at Ginny, but the rest of the table waited for her response, so she decided to let it go. "It's alright."

The conversation went on, but Ginny wasn't paying attention because Baron leaned down and whispered in her ear. "I apologize for that."

"Not the worst I've ever heard about my friends," Ginny said quietly, thinking of Witch Weekly and that insipid Rita Skeeter.

"She shouldn't have mentioned it," he said, one hand lightly resting on her back. And Ginny might have responded if she hadn't, at that very moment, caught sight of Harry sitting across the way at a table full of Gryffindors, including his date, Katie Bell, and Duncan Moran, among others. His green eyes burned with intensity as he took in the scene, and Ginny took a moment to revel in the fact that he was so clearly jealous, seeing Baron whisper intimately in her ear. Then a ache spread through her, wishing that instead of seeing Harry across the room, she were sitting beside him, laughing and talking about how much fun they would have that summer. But he didn't want that, couldn't, apparently.

"Ginny?" Baron looked concerned.

"I'm fine," Ginny said, turning to smile at Baron in reassurance. He nodded and leaned back, joining the general discussion at the table. This was harder than Ginny had thought, seeing Harry all dressed up and so painfully close after he insisted she stay away. Part of her was infuriated that he had asked her to stay safe, but another part that she would never mention wondered if he was just using that as an excuse to push her away.

But she wouldn't dwell on that. She would enjoy this time with her friends and ignore the little part of her that felt like it was crumbling.

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Baron and Ginny danced after dinner was served, danced as the sky went from blue to pink to purple and then black. The fairies stood out in darkness, their blue and yellow and orange lights glittering. It was a

quiet waltz and the musicians seemed to drag out the low notes and soften the high ones as Baron led her spinning across the floor.

“How long have you been dancing?” Baron asked as the tune changed and their rhythm sped up.

“As long as I can remember,” Ginny said, tilting her head to look up at him. “It was something my mum insisted on, us learning to dance. Most of my brothers hated it, of course, and quit early on, but I loved it.”

In fact, Bill had been the only one to lead her around when she was little, towering over her when he was home from school or his job, teaching her a new dance he had learned. She had never been particularly great at it, but that didn’t lessen her enthusiasm.

“May I cut in?” asked a voice behind the pair. Ginny and Baron both looked over and saw a girl that Ginny vaguely recognized as a seventh-year Slytherin—apparently a rather pushy seventh-year Slytherin—who had been sitting at the same table with Olivia Flint. The song wasn’t over, but they had stopped dancing, and Ginny decided that the only polite thing to do would be to let the girl dance with Baron.

“Another time,” Baron said. His hand on Ginny’s elbow kept her from stepping away. When she looked over at him questioningly, his focus remained on the girl, whose face seemed to be frozen in place as she walked away.

“I think you just made yourself an enemy,” Ginny whispered.

“I can accept that,” Baron said, taking her back in his arms. “She’s been in classes with me for seven years now, and I’ll be none the worse for having avoided more time spent in her company.”

“You know, I’m beginning to fear the things you say behind my back,” Ginny joked, following his lead as they stepped around and past other couples. “Are you so glad to avoid me, too?”

The lights in the room began to gently spin. “No. I normally enjoy the time I spend with you.”

“Normally?” Ginny repeated, smiling fully now. “So you don’t always enjoy me?”

“Do you enjoy every moment spent with me?” he asked rather frankly.

Ginny blinked at him, thinking of the progression of their friendship from that day in the dungeons when she had nearly made a potion explode to dancing with him in their formal attire. “I think I do. You’ve been a good friend.”

Baron inclined his head. “But just a friend.”

Luckily, Ginny danced best when not consciously thinking about it, so she managed not to show her unease. “Yes. A friend.”

Baron nodded, his face betraying nothing. “Yes, our conversation was clear.”

“I’m sorry if I—”

“I asked you as a friend,” Baron said, smiling a small smile. “And I’m grateful you came, though I wish I could have made your dinner conversation less difficult.”

Ginny laughed. Marie and Greg had proven to be exactly the kind of people that Ginny most loathed: pretentious and condescending. “It was almost more fun this way, watching Theo make subtle remarks about them that they couldn’t acknowledge.”

“They’re good friends of mine,” Baron said. “I didn’t expect them to treat you poorly.”

“They haven’t. They’ve actually been really complimentary of me. It’s just my friends they don’t like,” Ginny said, trying to make light of the situation that actually had bothered her all night. Greg had finally caught on to the fact that Ginny was particularly defensive of her friends, but Marie kept slipping up.

“You—”

Before he could say anything about her comment, Gretchen was standing beside them saying, “I’m cutting in now.”

Ginny grinned, and shot Baron a mockingly exacerbated look. “Another pushy seventh-year Slytherin. Feel free to ignore this one as well.”

“Another? Has Helen been bothering you again?” Gretchen twisted around until she spotted the girl who had tried to cut into Ginny’s dance with Baron. The girl seemed to shrink under Gretchen’s glare, but when the Ramsey twin turned back, Ginny saw nothing intimidating in her gaze. She was like a quick-change artist. “Don’t worry, I’m not just stealing your dancing partner, I am also providing one.” She nodded toward Theo, who stood quietly with his back straight and his ever-present smirk.

“As long as you brought me a replacement, I suppose I can’t object,” Ginny said, sighing as if she were disappointed. They switched dancing partners quickly and Ginny immediately felt the differences between dancing with Baron and Theo. Baron made all of the correct steps, never stepped on her feet, and always felt like he was in control. But Theo, while he led her through the same dance, managed to make it feel like he was responding to her, like he might make a mistake at any time, though he never actually did.

“Explain to me what you’re doing,” Theo began, direct as always.

Ginny looked around, absently keeping time with him. “Dancing with you?”

He gave her an amused look. “What you’re doing with Potter.”

“Oh.” Unpleasant feelings warred within her, an ache in her chest and fury that she had been pushed aside just after learning that Harry cared about her. Liked her. Wanted her in his life. Just not right now. “I’m trying to avoid hexing him.”

“Why?”

Since he seemed honestly curious, she gave him the honest answer.  
“Because he’s trying to protect me.”

“From way over there?” He looked over at the Gryffindor table where Katie was laughing and Harry was facing the opposite direction.

“That’s the idea. He stays over there while fragile, breakable, useless me stays over here,” Ginny said bitterly, wishing that Harry would at least have the decency to look over at her longingly or something, only to hate herself for wanting that. It wasn’t fair. But he was being ridiculous.

“I’m sensing that you’re not entirely happy about this decision,” Theo drawled, refocusing her attention.

“It’s stupid.”

“Yes, it is,” Theo said, spreading his fingers out across her back. “But it’s also very like him, isn’t it?”

Ginny sighed.

“Yes,” Ginny said, thinking of the way he stood in front of all of them at the Department of Mysteries, facing Death Eaters, and just a few weeks ago going tearing off after Dementors while telling them all to hide in the castle. “It’s exactly like him, actually.”

Theo and Ginny twirled under the sparkling lights a moment more.

“His mother and mine used to be as close as sisters,” Theo said at last, looking over her head. “But then mine married my father and his saved the world, and we became who we are.” The chattering of other students created a lull in the background. “I used to wonder sometimes, if I could have been like Harry Potter if my mother made different choices, but that’s laughable.”

“What do you mean?” She would have never suspected Theo of these thoughts.

"I mean that he is who he is, and I could never be like that." Theo's dark eyes shone. "You know half the trophies in the trophy room are his."

Ginny actually laughed in his long, thin arms. "He hates that. We joke about it all the time, and he wishes he could have them all melted down."

"Humility," Theo said, sounding entertained. "Another thing we don't share."

"It's different," Ginny said simply, shaking her head. "He's different."

"And you love him," Theo said, reminding her that he had an annoying tendency to blurt things out that she didn't necessarily want to hear.

"It's complicated," she said, repeating the excuse she had used with Kerney the night before. And she remembered Kerney's argument about pushing people away, but Theo was the son of a Death Eater, and despite believing that she could trust him, Ginny thought he already knew too much.

"Yes, it is," Theo agreed, and their dance continued.

Suddenly curious, and knowing he didn't care when conversations took strange turns, Ginny asked, "How long have you known Devon?"

"Years and years," he said smoothly. "Why?"

"It's just something Malfoy said to me the other day," Ginny said, thinking of their strange conversation in the dungeons. "He said I wasn't good enough to hang out with you or Baron, but especially not Devon."

Theo rolled his eyes. "Draco has always liked Devon."

"Liked her liked her?" Ginny asked, eyes wide.



Theo shook his head. “No. Not like that. He never wanted to date her, I don’t think. He’s just liked her as a person.”

That was entirely strange to Ginny, to think of Malfoy having a friend, but then she remembered Malfoy sitting beside Devon all those meals when Theo was gone.

“Is he her friend?” she wanted to know.

“Yes,” Theo said. “More than mine. He finds me tiring while she accepts him as he is without fawning over him like Parkinson. In fact, she’s already told me she picked a wife for him—a fourth year named Astoria. Imagine what they’ll name their children.”

“Do you think—”

“My dance partner has been taken from me,” Gretchen said, suddenly appearing beside them. Theo and Ginny stopped and looked around to try to spot the girl who had managed to take Baron from his sister. When Ginny’s eyes landed on Luna Lovegood and Baron stepping in time together on the other side of the dance floor, she smiled.

“She is very clever. I could see how she could steal him,” Ginny said.

“Apparently dancing with a single person for more than ten minutes can result in extreme Julifritus. I was required to move on,” Gretchen said, the sides of her mouth twitching and her eyes sparkling with delight.

“Naturally,” Theo muttered with a sly smile. The three were still watching the girl with glowing blonde hair chatter away at the most refined student in the room. Luna’s feet moved so quickly and effortlessly that they looked like a blur.

“So, I’m back to reclaim my partner,” Gretchen said.

Ginny shook her head. “You can’t renege on a deal just because you’ve lost your half.”

“Of course I can,” Gretchen said.

“Actually, I was looking forward to sitting a few dances out,” Theo said.

“That’s not polite,” Gretchen said, stepping forward as Ginny moved aside. “You’re my date. It’s gentlemanly to dance with me.”

“That’s true,” Ginny said.

Theo narrowed his eyes at her, and she gave him a big smile before wondering off the dance floor.

“Ginny!” called Katie Bell, waving just a bit as she set her napkin on the table and stood to make extra sure Ginny just had to see her. Damn. If she could have avoided that table all night, Ginny would have been happy.

“Hey Katie,” Ginny said, stepping into the welcome hug, trying very hard not to stare at Harry as he joined his date, but even out of the corner of her eye, Ginny could tell that his handsome face was serious.

“You look wonderful,” Katie said, grinning.

“Thanks. You do too,” Ginny said. Wearing short, bright blue robes that sparkled, Katie looked entirely too beautiful for her own good, only enhanced by the sense of joy she emitted.

“I’m sad to think I’ll never play Quidditch with you again,” Katie was saying, dragging Ginny into a Quidditch related conversation that the younger Chaser couldn’t ignore.

“I know. I’m going to miss flying with you,” Ginny admitted.

“Betsy will keep you busy,” Katie said happily, waving that off.

“I’m sure, but—”

“Katie!” called a girl from the table, waving frantically. “Hurry. We’re taking pictures!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Ginny. I have to go,” Katie said, dashing off to join her friends in the awkward, half-crouched pose that girls enjoyed when half of them were sitting.

And then there was really no avoiding it. Or, rather, no avoiding him. Without even consciously meaning to, Ginny’s eyes drifted over to his face, only to find him turned away. This gave her a few precious seconds to take him, tracing over his prominent cheekbones down to his chest and the expensive robes her mother had no doubt picked out for him. His hands were shoved in his pockets, and his mouth set in a tight line. Just as she was beginning to look at his hair, he turned and caught her. Damn.

She looked at the ground, then back up at him, still staring.

“Well, this is uncomfortable,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest and rocking on her heels.

“Maybe you should to go back to dancing,” Harry said, his eyes sparking with anger.

Her blood boiled. “You do not get to judge me tonight. I’m here with my friend.”

“Right.”

Pointing at him, she whispered fiercely, “You told me to stay away from you.”

“I told you to be safe,” he said quietly. “And you danced with a Death Eater’s son!”

“Yes, I did,” she said meanly, still in tones too quiet for prying ears, “and you know why? Because I can take care of myself.”

“You don’t think I know that?” Harry asked, incredulous. “I’ve worked with you in the D.A. for two years, fought with you at the Ministry. I know you cantake care of yourself. Hell, you could probably take care of your whole family, too, but I don’t want you to have to.”

Despite the compliments, she said, "I'm not a wilting flower, and I never have been. I can't just seclude myself from the world. I won't."

"I know that. I like that about you." He looked pained. "But I just want you to be—"

"Safe," she finished, filling the word with as much loathing as possible. "I know."

"Ginny," he said, his whispering voice painfully close, "I—"

But he couldn't finish the sentence, because both he and Ginny doubled over in pain at the same moment, clutching at their chests. Ginny had no idea what had happened to him, but she felt like her entire body was rent in two, stealing her breath and making her gasp for air.

"What. The. Hell," she croaked out, lifting her head to watch as some students turned toward them, but the majority were focusing on something on the dance floor, that had couples running both forward and backward. She felt like she had been Obliviated.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked, touching her elbow.

Ginny opened her mouth to say yes, but the broken feeling made her shake her head. "Something's really wrong."

"It's the wards," he said, quietly certain. "Someone's attacking them."

The moment he said it, she knew it was true. The pain she had felt mimicked the feeling of being keyed into the wards. But who the hell would be stupid enough to attack Wrightman's house?

"We need to find Wrightman," Ginny said, looking frantically around for the professor, who rushed into the room at that moment, having a whispered conversation with the two older men standing in the corner. They pulled out their wands and rushed out.

"We need to get everyone out of here," Harry said at the same time, snapping into his leader role with ease.

"Okay."

"Katie," he called, and while the authority in his voice normally would have made anyone pay attention, none of the girls at the table even acknowledged Harry. They were distracted by a sight that made Ginny gape when she finally turned to see it.

In the center of the now-empty dance floor, Draco Malfoy was on his knees, blood dripping from a large cut in his arm as a blade held in his left hand as he muttered an incantation.

"Shit!" Ginny said, grabbing Harry's arm and pointing.

It took him only a moment to realize what had to be done and whip out his wand, quickly saying, "Sensulia Mox! Sempre Obtilus!"

But the spells he cast to silence Draco and clean the mess, to knock him out and end the spell, rebounded off an invisible barrier, and a large shimmering thing was rising out of the blood as it grew bigger and bigger, until what looked like a black hole, or a tear in the atmosphere had simply appeared where he had been standing.

"Malfoy!" Ginny cried, racing forward, only to be repelled herself. But her exclamation caught Draco's attention from across the room. He looked at her dully, still seemingly exhausted.

"I told you to figure it out," he said, before collapsing completely.

The doors and windows immediately slammed shut all around the ballroom, glowing briefly silver to show some sort of spell had sealed them. All the other Hogwarts professors and Order members had been strangely out of the room, save for Gertrude Wrightman, who looked pale when she caught sight of Malfoy.

"Back against the wall, all of you!" Wrightman commanded, shocking all of the students into looking at her. In that odd moment, her voice rang with such power that most obeyed without question. She was

clad in only the first layer of her dress robes, having discarded the outer layer as she knelt beside Malfoy, stopping the bleeding, but apparently being unable to clean up the blood.

Ginny and Harry, along with a handful of others, separated themselves from the mass, preparing for whatever was to come. Lavender Brown caught Ginny's eye, pulling her wand from her purse and pushing Roger to stay behind her at their table while she made her way closer to Ginny.

Their attention was attracted back to the portal as a shiny shoe—followed by a leg—came through the black opening, followed further by the body of a man wearing a white mask and black robes.

He took a moment to look proudly around the room, lifting a hand and flexing his fingers as he said, "So much for the great Lily Potter's wards."

Harry sent the curse before the Death Eater even finished pronouncing his mother's name, and the barrier protecting Draco was clearly down as the spell shot toward its target. Unfortunately, the Death Eater, who by his voice Ginny had recognized immediately as Lucius Malfoy, dodged and two other Death Eaters stepped through. Her own curses barreled toward the man a moment later along with couple from Lavender and Luna.

"We have to stop them from entering," Ginny said.

"We have to disable them," Harry insisted.

The two other Death Eaters who arrived—Bellatrix Lestrange and a tall, dark-haired man whose body language Ginny found to be somewhat familiar—were doing strange things as they blocked the attacks.

"You dare to break into my home?" Wrightman asked, standing stiffly, the bottom of her impeccable robes covered in the blood of the student she had healed.

Bellatrix Lestrange let out a piercing laugh. “Little Wrightman’s all grown up! Expelliarmus!”

While Bellatrix exchanged hexes with an angry Gertrude Wrightman, the unknown man threw a bottle on the ground, breaking it and thus releasing some kind of potion into the room. The effects were immediate: there was suddenly a shimmering wall between all of the students and the Death Eaters, though the students had been quarantined into two main groups—the Slytherins and Ravenclaws on one side of the ball room, the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs on another side. Actually, it was three groups, counting Harry and Ginny, who had both been crossing the room when the attack began, and who were therefore secluded from their dates and the other students.

But a glance around her made Ginny realize that Luna was close, as she had been approaching them from the Ravenclaw area when the Death Eaters arrived. Lavender was still a ways off.

The different walls of light that had sprung up from the potion absorbed the spells that students shot at them and blasted one Ravenclaw student who had been so unwise as to touch it, back into the wall, where he slumped to the ground.

When Ginny turned to watch him, she saw Baron Ramsey standing up beside his sister and Theo. All three of them looked murderous, but when Baron saw Ginny, his eyes flitted to Harry, and he looked back at her with an almost imperceptible nod before turning back with his sister to watch what was unfolding on the other side of the shimmering barrier.

Wrightman began casting spells at the shield to no effect. If Baron looked murderous, it was nothing next to how their Defense professor looked at that moment.

“You have invaded my home, broken my wards, and trampled on a pact that was maintained between our families for three hundred years, Lucius!” Wrightman’s words were clipped, barely restraining the disdain that was written so plainly on her countenance.

"And for that I apologize," the senior Malfoy answered carefully, obviously concerned with the reaction of the hostess. Bellatrix glanced toward Draco, who was now lying face-down on the floor; the portal above him.

"Apology not accepted," Wrightman said, feeling along the wall of light with her hand. Sparks ignited but she did not appear harmed. Ginny wondered why. "Leave my home."

"I have to take down this ward," Harry muttered to himself, not even really seeming to listen to the conversation between adults as he looked at it. "I have to close that thing before more of them come."

There were already half-a-dozen Death Eaters in the room, fanning themselves out.

"How are you planning to do that?" Ginny asked, angry, scared, hating that she could do nothing but watch and listen.

"We aren't here to harm you," Lucius was saying, stepping closer to where Wrightman stood by a part of the wall between where Ginny, Harry, and Luna were sequestered and where the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were penned in.

"You are here to harm my guests," Wrightman threw back adamantly. "An offense that I will never forget."

"My Lord sends his apologies," Lucius added with his usual arrogance. "We are under strict instruction not to harm you."

"So this isn't just another horrid mistake like the Ramseys?" Wrightman demanded.

Lucius visibly flinched, and Ginny couldn't help looking over at Baron again. He was obviously on edge, and Gretchen was practically shaking. Both held their wands in hand as they stood in front of the mass of Slytherins.



Harry was muttering again. "The whole ward is layered. Tied into that Death Eater who threw the potion. It was probably blood magic. Like what Draco used."

"It'll take ages to dismantle," Ginny said, but Harry was already working on it. Ginny wished Hermione were here. This was exactly the sort of thing the other girl did best: figuring out puzzles.

"If he is willing to enter my home," Wrightman wondered aloud, "is Malfoy Manor secure?"

"My Lord—"

"Is destroying our world!" Wrightman snapped, suddenly spinning to face the mass of Slytherins watching the scene. She pointed to the portal and Draco Malfoy on the ground. "This is the world the Dark Lord promises—one with no respect for traditions or family or honor. Will you join him in his burning?"

The black portal was shutting, sucking itself back into Draco Malfoy's back where he laid breathing raggedly on the ground. There were ten Death Eaters in all.

"We're almost ready, sir," a Death Eater told Lucius.

"You're safe where you are," the tall, blonde aristocrat told Wrightman.

"Like hell, I am," she corrected, turning her head slightly. "Pim!"

A house-elf that Ginny recognized as the one who had helped her change clothes earlier popped into the space directly in front of her. Ginny lifted her head to stare instead of just listen as Wrightman demanded, "Take down the wards and banish these men."

"Yes, Mistress," the elf piped before disappearing.

"You wouldn't dare command elf magic on us!" Bellatrix exclaimed, wild eyes swinging around to look at the Wrightman matriarch, whose own eyes dominated the staring match.

“You broke the treaty,” Wrightman announced, still angry enough to spit. “Tell your Dark Lord that he has lost his audience with the Old Families. With this intrusion and the murder of the Ramseys, you’ve guaranteed our collective animosity.”

“He means no harm to you!” Lucius shouted, obviously angry—and not a little surprised—at this turn of events. Ginny figured that his instructions were probably not to refrain from harming Wrightman, but rather to carry out their mission without altering what they believed to be her neutrality. Having failed that, he was certainly in for a great deal of pain once his master became aware of it.

“Three-hundred years, Malfoy!” Wrightman exclaimed, altering her course of anger. “The Old Families have remained stable for three centuries, and you tossed it away!”

Harry kept working on the wards but Ginny found herself unable to turn away from the heated exchange between the adults. Pim appeared in front of Wrightman again, but this time, Bellatrix tried to attack the elf, who was protected by the shield and just kept addressing her master. Apparently the wards blocked all spells from any direction. Interesting.

“Door wards take time, Mistress.” The elf sounded close to tears at having to report the delay. “And we is unable to banish guests.”

“Why?” Wrightman snapped.

“They’re yours, Mistress.”

“How?” Wrightman demanded turning on the Death Eaters.

“We used the boy,” the tall, aloof Death Eater answered, motioning toward Draco who was still unconscious on the ground. “We didn’t break in.”

“You used Dark Magic.”

“We used blood magic. Black family blood, acknowledged by the ancestral Black home,” Bellatrix said, laughing as she held up her own hand. “The blood you shared with my family once.”

Draco had said that to Ginny, that Grimmaud Place was his. What did this mean?

“He was invited, and extended us an invitation as his guests,” another said.

Wrightman’s eyes flashed again, but she addressed her elf. “Lower the shield in front of me.”

“You don’t want to do that, Gertrude,” Lucius interrupted, his voice softening in what may have been his attempt at calming and placating Wrightman, but only succeeded in sounding patronizing to Ginny. She doubted Wrightman would hear it any differently “We were told not to hurt you. We’re only here for Harry Potter. We can pull him through the wards.”

“My guest, you mean,” Wrightman snapped, avoiding indicating any special status that Harry might possess in her concern.

Without thinking, Ginny called out, “Professor,” trying to show Wrightman that they were all ready for the shield to come down, but her cry did not distract the Defense professor so much as it drew the attention of Lucius Malfoy. Stupid, Ginny thought to herself. Her own impulses didn’t seem to be as good as Harry’s.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the little diary girl,” he said mockingly. Harry stiffened next to her and finally looked up from his work. Luna took the opportunity to stand at her other side, as Malfoy continued. Ginny just stared back at the head of the Malfoy family, feeling as her anger—and her magic—swirled stormily inside her.

“Kill any students lately?” he heckled. “Befriend any new dark wizards?”

“Manipulate any eleven year olds?” she asked coldly. “Or were you too busy trying to kill your son?”

His eyes darkened as fury overcame him, but Harry—being Harry—stepped in front of her then, and Lucius’s eyes lit up. “Both together. Convenient.”

“Leave everyone else out of this,” Harry said.

“Will you protect them all like you did your dear godfather?” Lucius asked, and sparks shot out of Harry’s wand.

“We put you in Azkaban that day,” Ginny said quickly. “How were the Dementors? Keep in touch?”

“You’ll lose your spirit by the time we’re through with you,” he said, looking hatefully at her through his creepy eyes. “Nott, bring them to me. Both of them.”

Nott! Ginny’s head swung around to look at Theo in recognition and horror for what he must be feeling, and her friend looked absolutely sick as he caught her eye from across the room. Eyes darting between her and Harry, Theo slipped forward, past where Gregory and Marie were holding hands tightly, past Baron and Gretchen.

“Father?” Theo asked, walking up to the barrier.

The Death Eaters glanced at him but didn’t respond.

“Mr. Malfoy already said your name, Father,” Theo pointed out, raising a single finger and pressing it against the ward his dad had created. “But I could always prove our connection, if you prefer.”

“Stop him,” Lucius barked at Nott, who paused in his journey to Harry and Ginny.

“This doesn’t concern you,” the elder Nott told his son from across the room.

“You made it concern me when you involved my school,” Theo said unwaveringly as he lifted his hand to his wand, touching the tip of his thumb.

"You wouldn't dare," snarled Theo's father, taking a halting step toward his son, disbelief in his voice. He was still a couple of meters away.

"Let's test that theory, shall we, Father?" Theo asked, turning to shout at his classmates. "Get ready to block their spells!"

"Theodore, they need not be hurt," Nott said sharply.

"As long as we give you two other students, right? Sacrifice the few for the many?" Theo said, pricking his thumb with the end of his wand. Ginny could see the blood across the room. "The problem is I owe one of those two a life debt."

Ginny saw Harry's shock out of the corner of her eye, but she was watching Theo press his bloody thumb against the ward. His father hastened to stop him, but it was too late. "Exercitius Dormum."

The shield collapsed, and Theo fell to his knees as the entire thing seemed to pour into his hand. And then, after a strange moment of hesitation, the spells started firing.

"Don't touch the students unless you know they aren't ours!" Lucius yelled, somehow banishing all those students near him to an unknown location outside of the ballroom. Baron and Gretchen were among the first to go, followed quickly by the rest of the Slytherins, most of the Ravenclaws and quite a few of the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. Theo's father grabbed him angrily and shoved a Portkey in his hand before he could wrench himself away, sending him quickly out of sight with a look of horror (and not a little fury) on his face. Lucius did the same to Draco, placing the Portkey on his arm.

The numbers didn't look good, Ginny thought distractedly as she dodged spells and sent her own in return. The Death Eaters were noticeably getting every student out of the room except for her and Harry, and Luna, who was doggedly covering Ginny's back in the chaos of hexes.

“The boy!” shrieked Bellatrix when only the three teenagers and their teacher remained with the Death Eaters. “Get the boy!”

A scan of the room as she and her two friends skirted and dodged around tables and decorations told her that three Death Eaters were dead or incapacitated. Seven on four. Not the greatest odds, even with an Unspeakable and the Boy-Who-Lived on your side.

“Nott, Avery, Flint, sequester Gertrude. Do not harm her!” Lucius yelled, motioning to where the Defense professor had just disabled two more Death Eaters and disappeared behind a rather convenient grand piano that had been uprooted by the melee. Now three more were racing toward her and even Ginny didn’t think she could handle that many on her own.

But at least their odds were closer to even. Five on four. They could swing that, she thought as she and Harry sent cutting and blasting curses toward Gertrude’s attackers. Luna continued to cover them as they did, and Ginny flinched as one of the pursuers who was not Theo’s father was struck by one of her cutting hexes followed immediately by Harry’s Impedimenta, which had the effect of blowing off the body part where the cut sliced him—in his case, his hip, and in so doing, his entire leg.

Four on four, now, Ginny thought to herself, turning to help Luna fend off Bellatrix and Lucius, before Lucius left to replace the incapacitated Death Eater in pursuit of Gertrude.

Gertrude was able to move around as long as she remained hidden by upturned furniture and decorations, and was getting in a few hits now and then, but she was up against three grown men, two of which were very powerful wizards.

And just as they began to close in on her, the room was filled with the deafening sound of the wards to the estate finally collapsing. It was like wrenching steel and a million elastic bands snapping around them, but so loud—and personal, because of their inclusion in the wards—that they could feel the vibrations in their chests and the wrenching in their bones.

More importantly, however, right as the noise began to dissipate, house-elves immediately began pouring into the room. There must have been close to a hundred of them, once all was said and done, and most of them rushed to rescue their mistress, who was dodging and defending herself rather formidably despite being outnumbered three to one. Unspeakable, indeed.

Once Nott had been severely stunned and Avery had apparently been killed, Wrightman shouted instructions at the elves while she dueled with Malfoy. Many of the elves disappeared from the room on what Ginny figured were Wrightman's instructions to find the other students and get them to safety.

Suddenly a loud BOOM went up, causing everyone, even the two dueling Slytherins, to stop in their tracks and turn to see what was causing it. Bellatrix had cast some type of ejection spell, presumably one involving very dark magic, since vivid green walls of eerie, shimmering light had erected themselves between the wizards and the elves, and the elves grew agitated when they found that the walls could not be penetrated.

Wrightman's gaze shifted briefly to the teenagers and then quickly back to her opponent, but not quickly enough. Lucius' booming intonation of a summoning spell caught Wrightman off-guard—costing her her wand—and he quickly strung her upside down in the air.

"Duck!" Luna yelled, shoving Ginny to the ground, where they barely avoided a spell wizzing overhead.

"Shields!" Ginny instructed, twisting upright.

Luna was dancing out of the way of the attacks for a few moments before one finally caught her in the chest, knocking her out. Racing over to check on Luna, who had managed to blind her attacker before being hit, Ginny knelt beside her and began to feel real hysteria start to form as she saw the too-familiar curse slashed across her friend's stomach. Oh Merlin. The same curse. The one that had put Hermione in the hospital for forever. They needed to get her out of there.

"Ginny!" Harry called out, banishing a table at Lucius Malfoy. The Death Eater blew it apart, causing splinters to fly at him. He beckoned for Bellatrix to take control of Wrightman as he went and confronted the teen.

Her friends were fighting or lying on the ground or banished. The stain glass window looking over the formal garden had pieces of a human body stuck to it. Ginny and Harry had done that. They had killed a man. They had—it was too much. The magic inside Ginny began to grow, to reach out, to try to protect her.

"Ginny!" Harry called again. He was fighting still. This was what the D.A. was about, what her training was about. Ginny tightened her grip on her wand and stood, shooting curse after hex after curse until she stood beside Harry and they fought together.

"Wrightman," Harry panted, dodging a nasty-looking, jagged spell. Ginny spun out of the way. She understood what he was saying. The professor needed her wand back. Lucius had taken it. Ginny shot a Bat-Boogey hex at Lucius to distract him, quickly followed by the Spearing and Crimineus Charms. Even though the Death Eater managed to dodge all the spells, the effort he expended doing so gave Harry time to Summon the wand from Lucius's pocket and throw it to the defenseless professor.

Caught up in the feeling of triumph, Ginny didn't notice the Impedimenta spell until it was too close to dodge, though she tried anyway. Wandless magic was useless if she couldn't move her hand enough to release herself from this slow-moving prison. Stuck where she was, Ginny was forced to watch Bellatrix make a brutal motion with her wand that sent Wrightman careening toward the ground. Even with her wand, it seemed Wrightman was unable to protect herself from such a swift plummet. The crack of her left arm breaking made Ginny's magic flare once more.

"It is only out of respect for your mother that I don't kill you now!" Bellatrix shouted, slashing her wand at Wrightman and sending a bright blue spell at her. A gold spell intercepted it, which was a lucky thing since Ginny wasn't sure Wrightman could have rolled out of the



way in time. However, when she saw that the spell had come from Lucius Malfoy, she was surprised.

"You will not harm her!" Lucius called out even as Harry and he exchanged more and more rapid curses.

"Just try to stop me!" Bellatrix yelled, brandishing her wand as she and Gertrude Wrightman began to fight. "Crucio."

"You never were subtle," Wrightman proclaimed, hefting herself off the ground with her good arm to avoid the spell. One of the professor's curses slashed Bellatrix's arm, but the black-haired woman didn't seem to feel it as she continued her assault.

"Subtle? I'll make you scream!" Bellatrix called back. A red spell flew past her. "You will weep with pain as you feel the power of the Dark Lord."

"It used to be your own power that mattered!" Wrightman called out sneeringly. A dark blue spell hurtled toward her, catching her foot and tripping her briefly. "It used to be you that mattered. No longer. You've given up everything for him: pride, honor, beauty."

"Spoken like a bloodtraiter!" Bellatrix cried out.

Wrightman's entire body flew to the right, crashing into the broken piano. Lying on the ground, her left arm useless, she was unable to move out of the way fast enough to avoid Bellatrix Lestrange kicking away her wand. Then the Death Eater pressed her shoe against Wrightman's neck with enough force to make it clear that she could kill the Defense professor in a moment.

"Are you ready to die?" the woman asked smoothly.

"You can't kill me," Wrightman bit back through her pain, glaring.

Bellatrix laughed crazily. "I do what I like!"

"You do only as you are ordered. You're nothing more than a slave!" Wrightman spat. Ginny felt a flash of pride watching the scene,

seeing her professor so unwilling to yield even though she was obviously hurting.

"I'm not the one on the ground!" Bellatrix shrieked, backing away two steps and casting the Bashing Hex. It hit Gertrude's broken arm, which suddenly looked sickeningly lumpy and bled profusely. Despite screaming in pain, Wrightman managed to roll, clutching her arm, closer to her wand. Bellatrix gave a particularly condescending look to Wrightman as the professor continued to slide backwards. "How far you have fallen from grace, Gertrude."

"You, a Black, want to talk about falling?" the intrepid professor panted from the ground.

"You will not speak of my family!" Bellatrix screamed.

"What family?" Wrightman shouted back. "You killed them all!"

Suddenly, Ginny was free from the spell, the caster having fallen to Harry. Scrambling to keep hold of her wand even as she rushed toward Harry, Ginny saw Nott had also obviously been awakened since he began firing curses at Wrightman. Ginny changed directions and went to aid her professor, but when she got there and started fighting back, Nott had shoved Bellatrix Lestrange toward Lucius and Harry. Nott was clutching his side in obvious pain. Wrightman and Ginny could have easily taken him in such a state if the professor hadn't been half broken and nearly exhausted and Ginny hadn't still been shaking off the after-effects of the jinx.

"The boy. We need the boy," he wheezed. It was obvious to a panicked Ginny that he meant for Bellatrix to incapacitate Harry and steal him away while Nott kept them busy. Harry, she saw, was covered in scratches and cuts, red bloodstains making his blue shirt dark as it stuck to his skin. But he was Harry, and Ginny knew that meant he would fight to his death before he went willingly. Bellatrix Lestrange, however, had plans other than mere kidnapping. Still angry from her exchange with Gertrude and still needing to vent it, the female Death Eater raised her wand and cast the second Unforgivable, Crucio.

Harry's screams filled the entire hall, the entire mansion, filling Ginny's consciousness and making her want to explode with anger. Instead, all it did was unlock the full fury of her magic boiling inside her.

With Wrightman taking on Nott and Lucius reopening the portal, the black void growing even then, Ginny reached out a hand with nothing but malicious intent and yelled, "Imperio."

The spell that burst out of her hand felt unlike anything she had ever cast before, unlike even her dream. It felt like Ginny was reaching out with her magic and wrapping Lestrage up in it. And with nothing more than desire, Ginny made Bellatrix Lestrage leap backward at the wall and break her own wand.

The piercing cold overcame her almost immediately, just as she remembered from the aftermath of her dreams. She fell screaming, red encroaching into her vision.

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Author's Note: We are so close to the new material! I'm excited. I hope you are, too. This chapter was a little rough. Much like Quidditch matches, fight scenes are very difficult for me to write, so I mostly didn't change anything except the character dialogues. Also, the Yahoo group listed in my profile has a new one shot in the files section that features Theo's mother (Samantha Caldwell from Prelude) at Theo's grandfather's funeral. Feel free to check it out and let me know what you think.

Speaking of which, thank you for all the reviews. I really like knowing what oyu guys think about the story.

## Chapter 15 - The Beat Goes On

It was cold the morning Ginny woke up, unseasonably so for the beginning of June. The blanket on top of her was pale blue and crisp, with a single crease down the middle. How odd, she thought. Her mother always ironed out things like that. She moved to sit up, but all of her muscles on the right side of her body ached fiercely, and she settled back against the headboard, groaning as she tried to piece together where exactly she was and why.

Unfortunately, before she could properly look around to locate herself, an unpleasant voice cut through the room.

"You had to use your wandless magic, didn't you?" Professor Snape's snide, demeaning voice made her turn to see him standing in his black robes, thrusting a steaming goblet at her. "Drink."

Ginny tried to lift her right hand, and found herself gasping in pain. Next thing she knew, her Potions professor was pouring liquid down her throat. It felt like sludge.

"You are a fool," he said disgustingly, and the memory of the Ball came back to her in waves: the fighting, the curses, the Death Eaters.

"Harry. Harry was in trouble," she said, her voice craggy and rough.

"Potter's alive. He always manages to be," Snape said, but Ginny was almost positive she had heard that incorrectly because Snape would never compliment Harry. "He'd fall through a convenient hole in the ground or something utterly ridiculous and live to darken my classroom. You, however, tore yourself apart like the bumbling moron you seem so insistent on becoming."

"Severus," said a quietly authoritative voice from beyond the curtain to Ginny's left. It was the first time she realized she was in the Hogwarts Infirmary. Before that particular revelation could make her head spin, Ginny was distracted by the sight of a pale Professor Wrightman—her arm in a sling.

"Professor," Ginny said, trying to sit up, but she was beginning to feel very heavy.

"Next time," Snape said, his dark eyes locked on Ginny. "Die before repeating this mistake."

"She didn't know what she was doing," Wrightman said, looking weary but confident.

"Then teach her," Snape hissed at the tiny professor. They shared a long look before Professor Snape left the room with a swish of his cloak. The summer before she started at Hogwarts, Ginny had stood around her bedroom trying on her Hogwarts robes and trying to make them billow like that.

"I cast an Unforgivable," Ginny said, staring down at her hand. Her fingernails were pristine.

"I saw," Wrightman said, her posture strangely slanted with her arm in the sling.

Lifting her hand, the weight surprising her, Ginny looked up at her professor. "It was wrong."

"If you feel that way, then don't do it again," Wrightman said, making Ginny think back on the Death Eaters and her professor and Harry.

Harry!

"Where's Harry?" Ginny asked, sitting up despite the ringing in her ears and the lead that seemed to be coursing through her body, pulling her down. "Is he okay? And Luna? And you?"

On this cold morning, Wrightman wore a shawl for warmth. "My arm will heal by this time tomorrow. The others are recovering as well."

Ginny swallowed, trying to suppress the knot in her stomach. "How long have I been here?"

"Two days," Wrightman said, shifting her shoulder. "You also spent one night and one day in St. Mungo's, but my husband brought you here for further treatment."

"Your husband?" Ginny couldn't remember any of this, as much as she tried, and for some reason it had never occurred to her that Professor Wrightman could be married. Glancing at her professor's ring finger, she indeed saw a wedding ring.

"Madam Pomfrey is reliable," Wrightman said, sinking into the chair at the base of the bed. It was the first time Ginny had ever seen her look so worn.

"She's taking care of Harry and Luna?" Ginny asked, letting herself lean against the wall behind her bed. "He was under the Cruciatus."

"Not for the first time in his life." Wrightman looked pained and sad and so very small. "He woke the first night, screaming and holding his forehead, but we subdued him."

Ginny stiffened. "He has bad dreams."

Wrightman gave her an unreadable look. "Yes. He does."

"Will he be okay?" Ginny asked. Even the memory of his piercing screams made Ginny's breathing shallow, bordering on panicked. In the back of her mind, she wondered if she was becoming co-dependent.

"He'll survive. He always does." Wrightman's words echoed Snape's, and Ginny wanted to strike out at them both. Survival wasn't the most important thing in the world. Surviving at his relatives wasn't the same as being okay. "After you incapacitated Bellatrix and fell, he brought down the wards himself, letting the Aurors in."

"How—how could he have done that?" Ginny asked, stumbling over her words in her anxiousness to learn the truth.

"He's a resourceful young man," Wrightman said calmly, as if it were perfectly normal thing to have done. It seemed impossible.

"And Luna?" Ginny asked, distracted again.

Wrightman looked toward the corner of the Infirmary where there were curtains drawn around the last bed. "She's recovering. Her father's with her."

"She was hit by that same thing as Hermione last year," Ginny said, remembering watching her friend fall to the ground with a pained expression on her face.

"By a less skilled wizard," Wrightman said in her very cold, non-comforting voice. In some ways, it made hearing about all of this easier, when no emotions tainted the facts. Still, Luna was one of Ginny's best friends, and she didn't know what would happen if she lost her.

"And everyone else? The other students? Theo and Baron?" The questions were starting to overflow as Ginny tried to push them past her heavy tongue. Sleep was clawing at her and blinking became more difficult.

"They were banished from my estate to the outlying town. Theodore was Portkeyed to his home. None sustained serious injury." Again, the diagnostic answer showed no relief.

"How? How did this happen?" Ginny wanted to know. The estates of the Old Families were sacred, powerful, the stuff of legends. "I felt it when the wards were being attacked. You must have, too. Why did you send the guards away?"

"A group of men were attacking the southern gate, and I sent the guards to deal with the problem," Wrightman said, her face tight. "It didn't occur to me that anyone would attack the home, where my wards had been infallible for close to twenty years."

Arrogance, Ginny thought. That was what had led to this disaster. Sheer arrogance.

"You should have considered everything," Ginny said, beginning to realize that her right arm was heating up and felt pleasantly warm.

"Do you imagine it was my greatest dream to watch my guests attacked? A three hundred-year-old pact dissolve? Do you think I wanted to watch children fight again?" Wrightman's anger lashed out unexpectedly, reminding Ginny that this woman was part of the generation that had lost everything to this fight. But that wasn't an excuse.

"What happened?" It wasn't the most eloquent way to ask the question, but Wrightman seemed to know what Ginny meant.

"Trisha Hisale invited Draco Malfoy unexpectedly," Wrightman said.

"Why should that matter?" Draco lying in his own blood wasn't an image Ginny would likely ever forget.

"He used Old Magic." She clearly would not speak about this anymore.

Sudden flashes of memory came to Ginny of a conversation in a dungeon. "Grimmauld Place. He went there in August."

Wrightman looked furious. "That would explain how he found the blade he used. What I can't understand is why I wasn't informed."

If she had thought about it, Ginny would have wondered when Tonks had given time for Draco to collect a blade, but Ginny wasn't really listening. The conversation from all those nights ago in the dungeon was coming back to her: "The house recognized my blood," he said, looking at her so intently. "The blood of my family and all its many connections."... He opened his mouth and made a little choking sound, glaring at her, then barked, "Put it together, Weasley."

"He tried to tell me," Ginny said, knowing that it was true as her arm began to border on uncomfortable hot. "He tried to tell me he was a danger."



The professor didn't look appeased by that information. "I doubt we will see Mr. Malfoy again any time soon to thank him."

"He was used," Ginny said, suddenly so certain that it didn't even occur to her that she was defending the very boy who had led to the battle that put her friends in danger.

"He made a choice," Wrightman said without pity.

"And I cast an Unforgivable and I—I killed man," Ginny said painfully, remembering watching that Death Eater fall as her spell and Harry's combined unexpectedly. He had been trying to kill them, of course, because the weight of her actions pressed down on her, and she finally succumbed to the potion's effects and closed her eyes. "A man is dead because of me."

"And you and your friends are still alive," Wrightman said, though Ginny felt like she heard her through a filter. "Regret has no place in war."

But that was lie, and they both knew it. Regret laced its way through every war. Good soldiers learned to deal with it: pushed it aside or pretended it didn't matter. Regret rimmed every eye of Wrightman's generation, and none more so than Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore. Even being on the right side didn't make it better.

And Ginny knew that Wrightman wasn't immune, either. The woman walked and talked like she was above all of this, but she had been in the trenches, fighting. Without even having to be told, Ginny could see that in the way the professor accepted what was to come.

The only person who had no regrets was a young, handsome boy who reached out from a diary and grabbed her eleven-year-old heart. The boy whose voice now whispered in her mind, You did the right thing, Ginny Weasley. Power should never be wasted. And in her half-dazed mind, his voice and Mrs. Black's from her dreams were melding into a single, encouraging tone.

Ginny could feel acceptance at the corner of her mind, reaching out for her. But she resisted because she knew that the feeling would be wrong, would steal part of her humanity.

Yet she had sacrificed her humanity long ago, when she had first sent her Basilisk to kill that annoying girl in the bathroom, its dark scales slipping along the glorious halls of Salazar Slytherin himself. Or when she killed her hateful, disgusting father, who looked as surprised as every other amusing little plaything that--

“Ginny!”

She bolted upright in bed, shaking her head and looking around. The light in the room was different, darker. Hours had passed. She must have fallen asleep in the middle of her conversation with Wrightman because in her seat, her father was now looking around, as startled by the voice shouting Ginny’s name as she was. And her mother was beside her, a hand on her shoulder.

“Are you alright? You were shaking,” Mrs. Weasley said, looking so concerned that Ginny couldn’t help but fling herself sideways into her mother’s warm embrace, wishing that she could feel as comforted by her parents today as she did when she was ten and thought they could protect her from the world. Or at least, protect her from the bad dreams that lingered just a little too long.

“Ginny,” her mother said, holding her tightly for a long time. “How are you feeling?”

“Sore and lazy,” Ginny said, trying to distract herself from the echoes of her terrible dream. “But physically fine.”

“Good, because we’d be mad if you went and hurt yourself without us again,” said a voice behind her mother, and Ginny caught Fred and George trying to look jovial. Or, at least, George was trying to look jovial. Fred actually managed it.

“Hey there,” she said with a smile, feeling ten times better knowing that they had been with their mother.

“Boys,” Mrs. Weasley said warningly.

“It’s all right, Mum,” Ginny said, the dream still whispering in the back of her mind. “It’s nice to laugh.”

The twins grinned, but their parents continued to look grim.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t here when you woke up,” Mrs. Weasley said, straightening Ginny’s sheets, pulling them higher. “I went to give your father a report. I was only gone a few minutes.”

“It’s all right, Mum. I’m fine,” Ginny assured her, but her dad was giving her an intense look that let her know he didn’t believe that.

“Of course you are,” Fred said genially, leaning against her bed despite their mother’s protests. “You’re clearly just trying to escape explaining why you didn’t tell any of us about your date with Ramsey.”

Ginny laughed. “That’s always my way to avoid questions—throw myself into the middle of a battle.”

“Well, you went a bit overboard, don’t you think?” George asked. “Harry’s been out of the hospital for a day.”

Ginny sat up. “He has?”

“I know you must be upset not to be sharing a room with him anymore—”

“Fred, now is not the time to tease your sister,” Molly scolded.

“It’s always the time to tease Ginny,” George said with a smile. “But I thought we told you not to get into any fights without us there again. Are you being purposefully difficult?”

“I wanted to steal your glory.” Resting her head against her pillows, Ginny nodded even as a shot of anguish went through her as she remembered the fight and the curses she had used so naturally that they stemmed from her very fingertips.

"It looks like Ginny could use some more sleep," Mr. Weasley said pointedly.

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course," Mrs. Weasley said, patting the sheets. "We should—"

"Stay," Ginny said quickly, not wanting to be left alone with the dreams that haunted her.

"Of course," Mrs. Weasley said, settling back down in her chair as she took her daughter's hand. "As long as you need me."

She ended up staying the night, which made Ginny feel simultaneously grateful and guilty as she watched her mother nod off to sleep around midnight in her uncomfortable blue chair. Her brothers had left quietly, kissing her cheek and whispering in her ear, "Don't die on us, Gin. You're our favorite."

"Don't tell the others."

A rotation of guests filtered through from that point on, though her mother was always there, and Ginny was forever assuring her that she was okay. She promised. But it was when her mother left that she had her two most interesting conversations. At the end of the second day, Ginny woke abruptly from another one of the startling memories of Tom Riddle's that were encroaching on her to find her dad sitting beside her bed.

"Are your dreams bad?" he asked seriously.

Ginny struggled to remember herself and push away the violent images. When she managed that, she answered his question, trying to breathe normally. "Nothing to worry about."

"I always worry about my little girl," he said, looking suddenly old.

Taking his hand, she said, "Don't worry about me, Dad. I'm fine."

"You are smart, clever, and strong," he said, shaking his bald head as he held her hand tightly. "But not fine. Not for a long time."

It felt like part of her cracked, remembering Kerney saying something so similar not that long ago. Did she really look like such a disaster to all of these people?

"I can handle myself."

"You can. I know," her dad said, taking his glasses off and reminding her suddenly of Charlie. "I'm not good at emotional things like your mother."

The last thing she wanted was an emotional talk. "Dad—"

"You've grown up a lot on your own, dealing with the diary mess, seeing Sirius die and your brother and his friends nearly killed." Arthur Weasley seemed quite sad about that.

"We've talked about that," Ginny quickly said.

"We began to, before you distracted me with my new lamp," he said, a half-smile on his lips.

"It wasn't a distraction. It was a gift." It had actually been Charlie who told her how to avoid punishments from their dad with presents.

He nodded. "You've grown up to be a very special girl, more like the twins than we could have guessed."

Ginny smiled. "Or like Mum would have wanted."

"She wanted you to be you."

That was a laugh. "She wanted me to be like her cousin Ginevra, whom she loved so much."

"She loves you," Mr. Weasley said.

"I know," Ginny said, and she did. Her mother's love was palpable in everything that she did for Ginny, from baking her an extra batch of cookies to buying her bras to sitting down to have a talk about Baron

Ramsey over Christmas. Ginny had always been Mrs. Weasley's favorite, but no one ever seemed to acknowledge how hard it was sometimes to be so favored, to have someone see you as such a paragon of perfection that you spent half your time with them wondering when they would finally see you and be disappointed. Maybe that was how Harry felt all the time, she thought. Maybe he waited for the world to really see him for the sixteen year old he was.

"It's fine not to feel okay all the time," Mr. Weasley said, tilting his head to catch his daughter's eye. "You don't have to make a joke of everything, and you don't have to comfort us."

Ginny, to her horror, started crying, and her dad gathered her up in his arms. "I do. Because I can't— I can't let this be real."

"You must."

Ginny shook her head. "I cast an Unforgivable, Dad. I think— I think I killed a man."

Arthur just kept holding her tight, letting her sob as she told him over and over again about how much she regretted it, how she thought she might be becoming like Tom. And when her sobs finally subsided and his look let her know that he still loved her, Arthur Weasley told his daughter for the first time about his life in the war.

"It wasn't only the Death Eaters who killed," Arthur said. "It was our side too, desperate as we were. It's how war works. Your mother's brother Fabian came to our house the night after he first killed a man, a Slytherin. The Aurors he worked with congratulated him, which he said was the worst part."

Yes, Ginny could see that, even if she couldn't quite wrap her mind around this new information about her legendary uncle.

"Your mother baked the whole night, pretending, I think, that she hadn't heard him," Arthur said, smiling a little. "But when her brother started to cry, it was Molly, not I, who sat beside him the whole night to comfort him. She had known the man he killed as he had, as a childhood friend."

The awfulness hit Ginny like a curse. Her mother's family had been old and respected, of course she had known some who became Death Eaters.

"She loves you fiercely, just as she loved her brothers, and she and I will be there for you," he said. "No matter what happens."

"I don't want to be a killer," Ginny whispered.

But even in this, their most intimate conversation, her father couldn't reassure her that she could avoid such a fate.

Two days after she woke up for the first time, Ginny said a wrenching goodbye to her family, insisting that she still take the apprenticeship with Professor Wrightman at the Department of Mysteries. Her father had been supportive, of course, letting her know which Unspeakables were the most trusted and reliable. The twins had laughingly told her to send them updates on the most top secret information. Bill and Charlie accepted the decision with warnings to work hard and not blow anything up, respectively. But the most interesting reaction had been from her mother.

"Wrightman she would take care of you," Mrs. Weasley said, fixing Ginny's hair absentmindedly.

"She will," Ginny said, remembering the way Wrightman fought so hard to protect her students at the Ball.

"If she doesn't, let me know, and I'll straighten her out," her mum said seriously, making Ginny smile and hug her all over again.

With her trunk already at Wrightman's from before the Ball, Ginny dressed in the extra clothes her mother had brought her and hugged them all goodbye, ready to leave the Infirmary the minute Pomfrey said she was cleared to go. Which, as it turned out, wasn't for another, boring hour as she waited impatiently for the results of a scan or something.

What she hadn't anticipated was the Trio showing up after their family left, standing together in their protective curve, Harry to the side with his hands in his pockets. Ron looked like a wreck, and Hermione had the strap of her tote clutched in her hand as if the thought of losing it was driving her to distraction. They looked tired, and Hermione was still too thin, evidence of the curse she had recovered from not that many weeks before.

"You know, you're too late to be considered fashionable," Ginny said bluntly, more than a little angry that this was the first time she had seen them in days. Angry that Harry hadn't thought to show up and at least mention the fact that he wasn't bleeding profusely from his stomach or something.

"Nice to see you, too," Ron said with a grin, looking much more like himself before he looked quite sad. "You didn't say goodbye to me before the Ball."

"You told me not to," Ginny reminded him, annoyed that he was turning this into something about her.

"So you decided to listen to me for the first time in your life? That's ridiculous," he said, walking over to her and giving her a huge bear hug. "I love you, Ginny."

"Where have you been?" she asked, still unexpectedly hurt.

Ron glanced at Harry as if his black-haired friend had to give him permission to tell his sister where he had been. "We're working with Dumbledore on something."

"You're not going to tell me?" she asked with an almost-hysterical laugh. "Even now."

"Ginny—"

"Ron," Hermione said, reaching forward to grab his hand as she cut him off. "Let's go outside and let your sister and Harry say goodbye."

"Why would we need to leave for that?" Ron asked.



"Because we're tactful," Hermione said, shaking her head at him. She walked forward and gave Ginny a warm hug. "I'm glad you're okay. Have a good time this summer."

"I'll try."

Then it was just Harry and Ginny in the Infirmary on the warm Wednesday afternoon she was supposed to have spent in France.

"Luna's still here, wheeling herself around like a pro," Ginny said, nodding at the still-curtained bed in the back of the room.

Harry nodded. "I saw her."

Good.

"Thanks for stopping Bellatrix," Harry said after a moment. His posture reminded her of Percy after her first year, hesitant and anxious.

"Thanks for—everything," she said, thinking of him speeding around the room, spells flying, shields jumping up.

"I didn't do much," he said, sounding perfectly honest and a bit annoyed.

"You fought off like a dozen Death Eaters," Ginny said.

"I did not. I dodged some curses is all," Harry said, eyes straying over to the dark double doors through which Ron and Hermione had passed. "Wrightman was spectacular, though."

"Yeah, she was," Ginny agreed, thinking of the blonde witch who had taunted Lestrangle and taken on three Death Eaters at once. "She said her husband moved us here so Madam Pomfrey could fret."

Harry smiled, his eyes lighting up. "Pomfrey said she's going to start charging me me rent, and, even though the healers at St. Mungo's

said I was fine, insisted on giving me a check up, saying that they had been known to miss dark curses before."

"She cares." Ginny leaned against the bed. "Wrightman, too."

Harry nodded, his hand still holding his wand. Ginny wondered if he even realized he kept it within reach constantly. "I think it has something to do with my parents. Guilt, I guess. I don't know."

"Sounds like you've thought about this a lot."

Shaking his head, he shrugged. "Hermione has. I just parrot back her words most of the time when I'm trying to sound smart."

Making a non-committal noise, Ginny let the conversation lull.

"Hermione also says you'll enjoy your work with Wrightman," Harry said. "Learn loads."

"Yep, loads of unspeakable things. I had to sign a document promising I wouldn't share the research." Ginny needed to go to her office soon.

Standing before her, Harry suddenly stiffened and said, "Lucius Malfoy said something about that, while we were fighting."

"Malfoy said a lot of things." Most of them had been easily ignorable, since he wasn't half as charming as he liked to think he was. Mostly he just looked scared.

"He won't say anything to you now," Harry said with a smirk. "Not after what you did to LeStrange."

His tone didn't seem to acknowledge what an awful thing she had done, but she still felt the need to justify it. "When I heard you screaming, I felt like I was being stabbed, and I just struck out without thinking."

He nodded. "I owe you."

“Okay. Tell me what you’re about to do,” she said easily.

Harry stared over her shoulder briefly. “I’m going to destroy Voldemort piece by piece.”

That’s all he would say.

“I could help,” she said. Even with a plan as vague and clearly unformed as Harry’s apparently was, she knew she could be useful.

With gentle fingers, he touched her cheek. “I know. I saw your Bat Bogey Hex.”

“But you won’t let me use it, will you?” she asked, looking at him resignedly.

He shook his head. “Not on this trip.”

“Why not?” She needed to know. “And don’t tell me it’s about my safety again because we both know I can handle myself.”

“I have to do this,” Harry said, sounding resolved and old in his young body. “I’d rather stay here and play Quidditch with you, but this needs to be done. By me. Now. Voldemort needs to be stopped.”

“You don’t have to do it alone.” She felt like a broken record.

His hand dropped to his side as he sighed. “You’re the first person I’ll come to when I need help.”

“That’s reassuring.” Her sarcasm oozed.

Harry just stood there like some sort of Imperius-controlled sap without a clue what to do. “I’ve never been very good at that sort of thing.”

Bugger that, Ginny thought. She had almost died fighting with him, and that was all he could offer? “That’s bullshit.”

If he had been in a battle he would have known what to do and moved with that stupid fighting grace he always had.

"It's true." He leaned in and kissed her softly. "Keep flying. I don't want you to come back lazy and slow."

She scoffed, unwillingly amused, but then it hit her that this might be the last time she would see Harry for months, and that he was about to embark on a truly stupid task. "Listen to Hermione. She's smarter than you."

Harry grinned, relaxing as the conversation turned more casual. "I know that."

"And take care of my brother. I love him, you know, even if I want to kick him most of the time,," she said, blinking back irrational tears. "And let me know occasionally that you're safe, alright?"

He smiled his wonderful smile. "You want me safe?"

It was unfair that at such an awful moment, he could still make her warm inside with just a simple smile. "I want you to come back here so I can properly yell at you for being ridiculous."

"In the meantime," Harry said, leaning over and scooping up Herpo, whom Ginny hadn't even noticed on the ground, "will you take care of my kitten?"

The tears were back. "Herpo will hate you for leaving him behind."

Holding out his little cat, Harry said, "And forgive me after its over, hopefully."

"Only if you survive." She took Herpo and held him close to her chest, where he watched his owner with his avid little eyes.

Harry nodded.

"I'm going to fight from here," Ginny said. "At school."

“Of course you are.” He looked confident and sure. “You and Luna and Neville are the new leaders of Dumbledore’s Army.”

Then he pulled something from his back pocket and handed it to her.

She had to shift her hold on Herpo to take the flat, shinny object. “A mirror?”

“Sirius and my dad used these. I broke one, but Remus— well, just say ‘Viator,’ and it’ll connect to mine.” For some reason, he looked uncomfortable. “I might not always be able to answer, and we shouldn’t use them except in an emergency, but I thought—”

“You can contact mine?” Ginny asked, hopeful.

He nodded. “I say ‘Domus.’”

Latin, she knew, for home.

Suddenly, Ginny threw her free arm around his neck and hugged him so tightly that Herpo made an unhappy mewling noise. Selfishly, she wanted him to stay, wanted to tell him something that would make him give up his stupid secret quest.

But Harry Potter had things to do. Important things that most people didn’t think a teenager should do. It was like Percy had said over Christmas: he’s just sixteen. It isn’t right to ask so much of him.

Ginny Wealsey, however, had been there in the Chamber of Secrets, had seen his face as he held Cedric Diggory’s body in his arms. She had seen adults try to take care of him, like her mother. She had seen adults try to guide him, like McGonagall. And none of them seemed to realize that it didn’t matter that he technically wasn’t an adult yet. He had grown up a long time ago, when tragedy burned up the childhood he should have had.

Besides, the world needed him now. So he would go. And she would let him. Because no matter how much she wanted to keep him in her arms, she knew that she had fallen in love with someone who couldn’t idly watch the world crumble.

For that matter, neither could she.

Harry pressed a light kiss to her cheek and said farewell, but she grabbed his hand when he turned to leave and said, in her strongest voice, "If you're going to leave. You're going to remember me better than that."

And she kissed the hell out of him.

Her hand cupping his neck, she went on her toes to press her mouth (and body) against his. Eyes closed, she felt the moment Harry gave in, wrapping his arms around her and letting the kiss drag on and on until it was officially snogging, until they were both gasping for breath and not caring because this was the one place in the world that they most wanted to be. They were desperate to be young, for these last moments when their lips moved together and neither could think about anything else.

It was perfect while it lasted—Ginny would remember that—but then Harry pulled away, with one, two more soft kisses, and ghosted through the door, past where her vision could see.

Time passed, and Ginny sat on the edge of her bed, feet on the ground. Herpo scampered around on the floor, where he rested on her feet, and the mirror remained clutched in her hand.

A noise across the room made Ginny notice Luna wheeling herself over. The first time Ginny saw, her, she had been surprised to see Luna in a movable chair, but the blonde had explained, 'Daddy gave me this wonderful Muggle chair, which is nice. Madam Pomfrey said I couldn't walk yet because of the blood that gushes out when I move. So I sit and push and it still bleeds a little, but not as much.'

Pomfrey had nearly had a fit when she saw the contraption, but Luna, being Luna, had smiled serenely and asked if the matron had eaten enough green beans as a child. The student still had great big bandages wrapped around her middle. There were a couple of red splotches that seemed to indicate it needed to be switched. But those disappeared, as all blood did in good magical bandages.

"I heard Harry," Luna said when she was closer. "But it sounded like a private conversation, so I plugged my ears and waited."

"He left," Ginny said, her voice hollow with shock and sadness.

"Left what?" Luna asked politely.

"Me," she said, giving her friend a small smile to hide the pain and offset the melodrama of the answer that burned at her.

"He had to," Luna said. "Harry's the sort of person who's living out a story, with twists and marvelous adventures."

"I would hardly call his life a marvelous adventure," Ginny said.

"Of course it is," Luna said, sounding confused. "He left home. That's how all the best stories start, with heroes leaving the place that limited them. Here, Harry became everything he could as a student and a friend and a Quidditch player and leader. At home, he was a nephew. And in our world, he's the Boy-Who-Lived. He needed to leave to become more."

"He's enough the way he is," Ginny said. "He's fine."

"He's not himself yet. The story isn't done." Luna sounded so confident sometimes that it wasn't until afterward, thinking about the conversation, that you wondered what she had really said. "He'll have a spectacular story. I hope I can be part of it."

"I wish I could, too," Ginny said. "But I've been left behind to be safe. The worst sort of story there is."

"That's not your story," Luna said with a smile.

"Really?" The warm summer wind shifted the curtains, and Luna watched Ginny curiously as Herpo crawled onto Luna's lap. "Then what is my story?"

Luna shook her head. "I don't know yet. But I hope I can be in it, as well."

Ginny smiled sadly. "You're huge in it: blocking curses and fighting beside me as a friend."

Luna beamed. "I would like that."

Of all the things the D.A. had given Ginny, her closer relationship with Luna was probably the best.

"Harry hears the voices in the veil more loudly than anyone, you know," Luna said from her rolling chair, sincere and confident at once. An image flashed before Ginny's eyes as she remembered that strange moment when they first saw it waving in the windless room of the Department of Mysteries.

"I hear them, too," Luna said easily, petting Herpo between the ears, "but I think Harry hears them always, and he doesn't want to hear us with them."

"Us?" Ginny asked. Deciphering Luna sometimes took a couple of guesses when Ginny wasn't at the top of her game.

"You. Me." Luna shrugged. "Everyone. He wants to save us all from reliving our parents' lives. He doesn't want to die young like his, or have me blow up like my mum or driven mad like Neville's. He wants us on this side of the veil, which is short sighted of him."

"He can't protect us all."

Luna tilted her head. "He already has."

Ginny shook her head. "I don't want him to. I don't want him to leave."

"Harry wants you to be happy, but not in danger. So he's confused. Which, for a boy like Harry who always knows what to do when people are trying to kill him, is probably frustrating when faced with nothing more than a pretty redheaded girl."



“A pretty redheaded girl who he can leave at the drop of a hat.”

“You’re spending the summer in France.”

“That’s beside the point.”

“Everything is beside a point. But his point or yours?” Luna asked, looking quite content.

“Miss Weasley.” Professor Wrightman’s voice in the doorway surprised Ginny. “Are you ready to leave?”

“She’s been ready for a while,” Luna said.

“It’s nice to see you, Miss Lovegood.”

“It’s nice to see,” Luna said happily.

“I have to go,” Ginny said.

“Have a great time,” Luna said, happy as ever, letting Herpo follow Ginny from the Infirmary into the rest of the year.

One Month Later

It wasn’t a long walk from the external Floo at the Ministry of Magic to the internal one that took employees to the Department of Mysteries, but it always felt like the longest part of the day—sloshing through the crowds of milling people with Daily Prophets tucked under their arms, not talking about the latest disaster or trouble facing the wizarding world. The main entrance hall was a quiet, oppressive place that Ginny could not leave fast enough. Ginny had learned to rely on Wrightman’s steady walk as a metronome of calm in the midst of the tension.

“Morning, Ms. Wrightman, Miss Weasley,” the guard at the intra-Floo site said. “Looks like rain.”

“For those who cannot see clearly,” Wrightman said, tossing the powder in the flame and disappearing.

“She’s talkative,” the guard said, nodding at where the professor had been.

“When she wants to be.” Ginny said her code phrase with a nod, tossing the powder in the local fireplace and heading straight in. The direct-Floo—a joint project between the Time and Thought rooms—had been one of the first things Ginny had wanted to learn about at her new job, which had led to her learning about the new security measures that had been placed on Department, and the gruesome way the Death Eaters had overridden the last measures to ensure Harry and his friends could stroll right in.

“Have you seen the paper today?” Wrightman asked, as if there weren’t three papers, including the Daily Prophet, laid out on her breakfast table every morning by one of the many house elves who made life so easy there.

“Yes,” Ginny said, taking off her cloak and hanging it on the rack by the door.

The blonde woman nodded as she sat behind her immaculately organized desk. “You’re working in the Death Chamber today.”

“For the next three days,” Ginny said, avoiding thoughts of the news by running over a mental checklist of all the projects she had to complete in that time. She was grateful the professor hadn’t dwelt on the front-page story that Ginny was actively trying not to think about.

“Francine said you were asked to use your wandless magic yesterday,” Wrightman said.

Clenching her right hand reflexively, Ginny nodded. “Yes, but I told them that wasn’t an option.”

“They were curious about the reason.”

“So am I,” Ginny said, settling into the seat across from her. They normally had these daily touchbases in the afternoon. “But all I can

give them are half explanations about mind magic and memories that aren't mine."

Wrightman's sharp eyes narrowed. "I thought you weren't having any more dreams or memories."

"I don't have any new ones," Ginny said, "but I still have the old ones."

"The orphanage and the boys and the family being tortured," Wrightman said, her emotionless voice making it easier.

"Yes," Ginny said, remembering the memory of the family more clearly than ever and pushing down a shiver. This was an old burden, and she distracted herself by glancing around at the bright walls.

The first and most surprising thing people noticed about Gertrude Wrightman's office was the multitude of pictures lining the walls of the otherwise clinically pristine office: pictures of Wrightman in her school robe as a teenager, green and silver scarf tucked around her neck; of Wrightman with her mother and father in beautiful dress robes; of Wrightman looking unhappily at a cat that wound around her ankle; of Quidditch games with Wrightman in the stands; of Wrightman in her wedding dress; of Wrightman with a beautiful red haired woman in from of the Locked Door in this very department.

But Ginny's favorite photo, the one that always drew her attention and calmed her nerves, was a tiny one almost obscured by a large photo of Wrightman's two children at a party; it was of a younger Gertrude Wrightman holding a very tiny baby, and looking at the camera with bemusement.

On the fifth day of work, Ginny finally commented on the pictures. "I didn't expect you to have decorated your office like this."

Wrightman looked around as if she didn't do it very often. "I didn't."

"Someone else sneaked in here and put up all these personal photos of you?" Ginny asked with a teasing smile. "That was thoughtful."

Wrightman gave her a quelling look that only served to make Ginny's grin grow. "Yes."

"Yes someone sneaked in?" That was the most amusing thing that Ginny had heard in a long time. "Why?"

"She had wanted a place to practice a new charm that was meant to copy images over large distances," Wrightman said, joining Ginny where she stood by the wall. "So she experimented here first. It was a partial success, as she managed to imprint a copy of this photo, but a failure in that she made it permanent, which wasn't conducive to secret correspondence. She eventually perfected the Charm, but left my office as it was, adding photos whenever she had the chance, and teaching a few mutual acquaintances the same spell to reach my office. My husband enjoys it now."

The first photo—the one Wrightman had touched so lightly with two fingers—was of the professor standing in lovely bright blue robes with a small baby in her arms.

"Is that Juliette or Demetrius?" Ginny asked, leaning closer.

Wrightman looked like a statue. "Neither."

"If it's not one of your children," Ginny said, turning toward her, "then who is it?"

Wrightman looked quietly at the picture, before gathering herself and saying, "It's your friend Harry. His mother was the one that made the Charm."

She offered no further explanation. "Really?"

"Yes. She worked here."

"When was this photo taken?"

"Just after Harry was born," Wrightman said, eyes trailing over the colorful pictures. "I have one of your friend Andy as a child as well. His mother enjoyed sending me pictures as much as Lily."

That's right, Ginny thought. Wrightman had been close with Mr. McGrath when he visited. He had even credited Wrightman with helping him stay together after his wife died.

"You knew them well enough that they would do this? That Mrs. Potter would build your wards," Ginny said, looking wonderingly at the tiny woman who stood so proudly.

"We went to school together," Wrightman said, and the subject was dropped.

Over the course of Ginny's first month at the DoM she had learned more about the friendship between Gertrude Wrightman and Lily Potter. Not that many people talked about it. Gossip wasn't highly valued at the DoM, just knowledge and understanding of true, important things. But there were a few Unspeakables—David in the Hall of Prophecy and Louisa in the Brain Room—who had worked with them together, and with only the lightest questions, they let Ginny know exactly how close the two women had been, how devastated Wrightman had been after the Potters' deaths.

Ginny wondered how much Harry knew about that from his talks with the professor. He had told her once that Wrightman had known his mother well, like Remus knew his dad.

Pushing away thoughts of Harry that led to thoughts of the newspaper article, Ginny opened her folder and handed Wrightman a piece of parchment detailing the mechanics of protective spells. "The Prophecy Unspeakables want access to the Locked Door."

Barely glancing at the document, Wrightman nodded. "Schedule a meeting."

Ginny poked the copy of Wrightman's calendar with the tip of her wand. "Next Tuesday at half ten."

Wrightman glanced at Ginny's folder. "Anything more?"

Ginny shook her head, pressing down the stack of notes that fit in her secretly enormous folder as she shut it. “No. I’m due in the Death Chamber in less than ten minutes.”

Wrightman nodded. “I’ll see you at six.”

As she walked through the winding corridors into the circular room and then through the door on the left, Ginny couldn’t help but appreciate the time she had spent in the company of her professor and now this department.

“Ginny!” called Sebastian Smith as he walked down the corridor, the man she had met over Christmas at her dad’s office. “Ready for some fun?”

“Hands off, Sebastian,” said his wife, a calm woman with brown hair who walked beside him. “She’s ours today.”

“Oh, that’s sad. You’re so boring,” Sebastian said with a smile before kissing her cheek. “See you later, love.”

“Are you ready?” His wife was the Francine that Wrightman had mentioned earlier, and Ginny was glad to have run into her before going to the room.

Ginny nodded. “I prepared the potion you wanted yesterday.”

“I’m glad Gertrude let me know about your talent,” Francine said, walking through the winding corridor quite casually. “Otherwise, I would have squandered this opportunity.”

Among the many, many surprises at the Department of Mysteries, the mix of workers in the Death Chamber had nearly bowled Ginny over. There were only three of them—less than half of what the rest of the rooms normally had—and while Francine and Constantine Croaker reminded Ginny of Luna, the other Unspeakable, Rasputin Bode, was a brooding, evil man Ginny knew to be a Death Eater. Ginny’s subsequent anger had been a little intense.

"You can't honestly expect me to work with a Death Eater!" Ginny had exclaimed two weeks previous. "That man has tried to kill my friends and family!"

The Direct of the Department of Mysteries, an ancient woman named Amelia Allen, walked into Professor Wrightman's office sometime during the argument, and commented to Wrightman, "I had thought you chose her for her open mind."

"I did," Wrightman said, ignoring Ginny, who suddenly felt both angry and as small as a beetle. "But she slips into being a typical teenager occasionally."

"That must be tiring," Allen said.

"Men he worked with attacked this very department," Ginny said, controlling her voice enough to not being yelling any more, though it was an effort.

"Yes," Amelia Allen said, "they did."

"And you just let him work here, knowing that he probably helped Voldemort break in and steal that prophecy a year ago?" Ginny asked, somewhat subdued by Allen's calm demeanor.

"Mr. Bode, who is your senior and teacher, has studied the veil for nearly thirteen years, and he will continue to do so whether children like you feel it is unjustified or not, because the prejudices of this world cannot touch our pursuit of truth."

So now Ginny worked with a Death Eater, which was easier than she expected, and had struggled to regain the respect of the Director, a much more difficult pursuit. Bode and she struck a tentative truce as he quietly watched her work, gave insight occasionally, and left her alone the majority of the time.

"Welcome," Croaker said as they entered. He and Bode sat on the Floor of the room as always, backs against the wall, and studied the veil that had stolen Sirius Black from the wizarding world.

"The day is calm and beautiful," Francine said, joining them on the soft, finely embroidered pillows. The Unspeakables in this chamber rested on the soft cushions and watched the unseen wind ripple through the current, leaking out in to the living world and touching all who walked in daylight and in darkness.

And today, Ginny sat beside them and finally let herself think about that article, and let herself cry for the man who now whispered on the other side of the swaying veil.

"Admit that you were bored in her room, and I'll let you in on our study of broom mechanics," Sebastian said at lunch. His wife just smiled as she cut a banana into pieces on his plate.

"I like it," Ginny said diplomatically.

"But not best, right?" Sebastian started eating his fruit without thought. Despite being a dozen years older than Ginny, he had so much energy that she sometimes felt tired just watching him.

"It's calm," Ginny said, trying to muster a smile. "I needed calm today."

Sebastian looked sympathetic, but nudged the man next to him—a large man who glared a lot but could speak intelligently about everything from Quidditch history to Muggle science. He made Ginny uncomfortable, so she let her mind drift to the Wrightman's work with Love, a locked door that repelled every spell sent at it.

"Even Avada Kedavra?" Ginny had asked, thoroughly intrigued on the very first day working there.

"Casting the Killing Curse on a door that resists all magic didn't seem like a very intelligent plan," Wrightman said, tilting her head to the side as she slid a potion under the crack in the door. "It could kill you."

Well, that hadn't really satisfied Ginny's curiosity, so she had spent most of the night in the department archives researching how the rooms were built, and when. There was surprisingly little information,



but the little that existed made Ginny even more convinced that no one had 'built' these rooms, but rather that the Ministry was here because of this department.

Director Allen, had agreed, and talked to Ginny at length about her personal knowledge of the department, which had been a staggering amount, as Ginny told Wrightman when they were working together a week previous.

"You'll have to tell us how the Locked Door compares to our veil," Fran said, pulling Ginny back into her lunch conversation on that hot mid-July day. "Director Allen said you were well suited to note the comparisons."

"And Director Allen knows everything," Sebastian said quietly, but there was no malice in his voice, just awe. "She's the one that brought Harry Potter's mother here, you know. Lily Potter. Amelia was her supervisor. Brought her in."

In fact, Ginny had known that. It was one of the first pieces of information the guard had whispered to her when she arrived: "Our director—yes, that woman. She knew Lily Potter. Yes, that Lily Potter. Thought of her like a daughter."

"Miss Weasley," said a quietly authoritative voice behind her, and she turned to see Amelia Allen herself.

Standing, Ginny said, "Hello, Director Allen."

"Good afternoon," she said, old and tired. "The Minister would like a word with you."

A hand clenched around her heart as a dozen reasons for such an invitation occurred to her. "Minister Bones?"

The grey-haired woman nodded. "Yes. In her office at one."

Glancing at the clock on the wall, which said it was Pluto past Saturn, Ginny forced herself to ask, "Do you know the time?"

"Half past twelve," Allen said, both hands on her cane. "I suggest you leave as soon as you are done here, for this department does not easily let people go."

Thinking back on it later, Ginny realized that she should have stopped fretting the moment she walked in and Minister Bones stood to meet her in the middle of the office, giving a firm handshake. Ginny was close enough to see the bags under the Minister's eyes and the deep wrinkles on her forehead that a fading glamour could not cover.

"Thank you for arriving promptly," the Minister said, setting back behind her enormous desk and motioning for Ginny to take the soft red chair in the middle. "I've heard good things about you from Director Allen."

"She's been easy to work under," Ginny said neutrally.

"Yes, well, she's old," Bones said, lacing her fingers together before cutting straight to the point. "I asked you here today to discuss an article in the Daily Prophet."

A cold weight dropped in Ginny's stomach. "Oh?"

"Yes," Director Bones said, placing the paper on the desk so that Ginny was unable to avoid the large picture of Albus Dumbledore on the front under the headline, 'Dumbledore Found Dead. Harry Potter Missing.'

"I read the article," Ginny said.

"What did you think of it?" the Minister asked, leaning forward.

What did Ginny think? She thought she wanted to cry or scream or go for a long, long fly. She wanted to be able to make the hole in her chest stop aching and calm her nerves. She had looked into the mirror that Harry had given her and whispered viator and seen Harry's grief-ridden face as he confirmed what had happened, but he had to go too quickly, had to do something else that Ginny couldn't be a part of. So the mirror rested at the base of her locked trunk in

Wrightman's French estate, and Ginny went to work with the veil that whispered to those who really knew death.

"I was shocked to hear that the headmaster was dead," Ginny said honestly, glad that her voice never shook. A habit picked up from years of following after her brothers, trying to convince them that she wasn't too young for anything. "The article mentioned the possibility of a memorial."

Bones shook her head. "That was a foolish thing to write. In this current political upheaval, a large ceremony would be inappropriate."

"You mean you think Death Eaters would attack?"

Bones paused. "Yes."

The Minister gave Ginny the chance let the full implications of that statement wash over her. It meant there weren't enough Aurors to spare to fight Death Eaters at all. It meant the Minister thought they were losing.

"There were no funerals during the first war," Bones said, adding derisively, "Your uncles, for instance, were buried in a Muggle plot, away from the Prewett line."

"I never knew them," Ginny said, ignoring the tone of a woman Tonks had always told her was fair and honest. Even Harry had spoken well of the grey-haired woman who had presided over his ridiculous trial.

"Too bad," Bones said, tilting her head to the side.

Feeling an increased sense of unease as she spent more time with the woman, Ginny asked, "Minister, why did you call me in here?"

"I want to know where Harry Potter is," she said bluntly.

"I have no idea," Ginny said, and it wasn't even a lie. All she had seen in the mirror had been his face and what looked like a tarp behind him.

"We need to stand united," Bones said, clutching the edge of the paper. "We could help protect him."

The room felt cold suddenly. "Excuse me, but didn't you just say you couldn't protect an hour-long funeral?"

"The Chosen One is more important than a ceremony," the Minister said dismissively, and her mood swing made Ginny too suspicious to even scoff over Harry's newest nickname. She wondered if he knew about it.

"I haven't talked to him since we left Hogwarts." Charlie had always said that Ginny's greatest gift was her unmitigated gall, which gave her the ability to blatantly lie and do so without guilt.

"You must have some idea," Bones said, calm once again.

"No. Harry and I were never close," Ginny said.

The director tapped a finger on the desk. "I've heard otherwise. You were part of the break in last year, fighting with him and his little gang of friends, and you were his date to the Hogwarts Ball."

"No, I wasn't."

"Now, now. Don't lie. You stood beside him."

The level of information that she had shouldn't have worried Ginny. After all, this was the Minister of Magic, and yet the detail was too precise while the actual facts were lacking.

"I started dating a Slytherin Harry didn't approve of this year, and nothing's been the same between us," Ginny said.

"A Slytherin?" Curiosity shined through the woman's intelligent eyes, and suddenly something clicked in Ginny's mind.

"Yes. Theodore Nott," Ginny said, plastering a dreamy look on her face as she tried to mimic Lavender Brown's method for escaping conversations she didn't want to have. "Our first date was in May. We

went to Hogsmeade, and he bought me lunch. He was so much better than Dorian Castleton, who I had dated earlier this year.” She made up the name on the spot, not wanting to embroil Duncan in this. “Don’t tell anyone, but he sort of drooled a little when we kissed, and that was pretty awkward, let me tell you. But Theo was more romantic than that. Actually, we were dancing at the Hogwarts Ball before it was attacked and all that, so I’m sad I didn’t have the chance to tell him that I think I love--”

“Weasley!” Bones said. “You’re babbling.”

Ginny grinned inwardly even as she tried to look radiantly happy. “I can’t help myself when I talk about him. I mean, I know I should be sad and everything, what with the headmaster dying, but I never really knew him that well. He was always sort of aloof, and Theo said he wouldn’t like it if he knew we were dating.”

“I heard that you were close to Potter.”

“Not anymore. Theo said it was because our bond was so strong that it intimidated Potter. Harry. Theo always calls him Potter. It’s easier when you’re an only child to do that. When people called me Weasley, everyone turned around, but it was never for me because—”

Scowling, Bones stood. “Thank, Weasley. That’s all I needed. I have another appointment. Your brother will show you out.”

Ginny twisted in her seat when Percy opened the door. “Percy, it’s so good to see you. I was just telling the Minister about—”

“Is my 1:30 appointment here?” Bones asked, cutting Ginny off again.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll send her in,” Percy said, holding the door open for Ginny, who stood and held out her hand to the Minister.

“Thank you so much for having me,” Ginny said as the old woman pressed her wrinkled hand into Ginny’s, meeting her eye solidly. “You’ll have to show me what you do later.”

And just as it had happened in December with Professor Wrightman, Ginny was suddenly pulled into the Minister's mind, with a feeling similar to a Portkey. Only instead of a memory of Sirius Black, Ginny now stood in a well-lit old-fashioned study, watching Severus Snape and a man with a large scar across his face.

"It's finished," Snape said, looking as disdainful as ever.

"Excellent. It begins tomorrow, then." The scared man's voice was loud and penetrating.

"I don't suppose you want to tell me about your ill advised need for Polyjuice Potion," Snape drawled.

"It's a surprise," the man said.

Having learned enough, Ginny pulled out quickly, and tried to pretend like nothing had happened as she quelled the disorientation she felt. "I mean, as interesting as the DoM has been—I call it the Dom. Like a word. The other Unspeakables don't really approve, but—"

"Enough!" Minister Bones—or the man pretending to be her—commanded. If it were like what happened with Wrightman, he was experiencing as much confusion and discomfort as Ginny.

Percy quickly ushered his sister out, sending the next appointment in before turning to scold his Ginny. "I can't imagine what you thought you were doing in—"

"Percy, you need to take three days off," Ginny whispered urgently. This was her brother, after all. Her brother. "Call in sick or say someone died or something."

"I can't do that." He looked flustered and irritated and overwhelmed.

"Percy!" Ginny snapped, the beginning of the piercing cold spreading through the hand with which she had taken the imposter Minister's hand. "You know me. You do. You know I wouldn't ask this if—"

"You don't want me here."

"I understand why you're here now," Ginny said quickly. "Working for the good. That's fine. But just don't—Just please, take three days."

Percy looked like no one else in the family, though he had Ron's height and slender build. His glasses were unique to him. But his eyes were the brown Weasley eyes that Ginny shared, unlike the rest of her brothers who had blue and green and grey.

"Okay," Percy said at last, watching his thin sister as she began to shake. "I'll take you back to the Department of Mysteries, and then go home."

Exhausted, Ginny nodded. "Thank you."

He had a quick Floo call with his replacement, who had popped in before they even left, and then they made their way to the intra-Floo, where her brother watched her step into flames, and she could only hope he listened.

"Ginny?" Wrightman asked, rushing over to where Ginny had collapsed after the Floo travel.

"The Minster's an imposter," Ginny asked, clutching as her hand.

Seeing the movement, Wrightman sharply asked, "You used your wandless magic to check."

"To invade her memories. His. Like I did with you," Ginny said, doubling over as she held her arm. The cold had moved to the shoulder. "At least that essay was helpful."

"You irresponsible child," Wrightman snapped, twirling around to root through her drawers and pour a potion down Ginny's throat. The relief from consciousness was instantaneous.

Lying on the couch in Wrightman's office, Ginny got to see the entire thing unfold, from Director Allen and Wrightman's initial conversation, to the plan with the new MLE. All of them were checked for the Dark Mark, curses, and Polyjuice.

"Bones is missing," Allen said. "An imposter stands in her office using Polyjuice potion."

The head of the MLE, a large man named Rufus Scrimgeour who looked rather like a lion, grew stiff. "How long?"

"I do not know," Allen said sadly. She had been a good friend of Bones's.

"Is she dead?" Rufus asked gryffly, his trust in Allen implicit.

In her dark, tailored robes, Allen looked too thin to be healthy as she said clearly, "She would not have been spared."

Straightening his posture so that he was positively towering over the shorter women, Scrimgeour said, "I'll handle it."

"The Ministry will collapse without a head, and on the heels of Albus's death, people will panic," Allen cautioned.

"I'll keep it private, and talk to her family about alternate stories," Scrimgeour said.

"As I said when Fudge was killed, I cannot take part in a deviation from truth," Allen said, her old hand shaking slightly. "I will arrange what I can from here."

She left through the heavy wooden door.

"How did you miss this?" Wrightman snapped, rounding on the man who led Aurors and struck fear in Death Eaters.

"She was the Minister of Magic! The ex-Head of the MLE!" the man exploded, running his hands through his hair. "How were we supposed to know to check her?"

"You were supposed to check everyone!" Wrightman was furious.

"She had a full guard."



“She was still human!”

“And she was my mentor,” Scrimgeour said angrily. “I will handle this.”

He left in a rush through the flames in the corner of the room, spite in every movement.

Ginny didn't go to work the next day, sequestered to Wrightman's house to finish the five potions Wrightman had given her. Normally, this would have been cause for a lot of complaining, but a flood of awful new memories was creeping into her mind, held at bay by the potion-induced haze.

“You're home in the middle of the day,” Wrightman's nine-year-old daughter Juliette said as she went to the piano that afternoon.

“Yes. I'm not feeling well.”

“Have the house-elves given you everything you need?” Juliette asked kindly.

Ginny smiled softly. “Yes, thank you.”

Juliette had her mother's blonde hair that she often plaited or wore down. Her brother, Demetrius, was younger and had a darker complexion that he probably shared with his father, whom Ginny hadn't met because he was away at a long conference. Both children shared their mother's striking blue eyes.

“I'm supposed to practice for an hour before my next lesson. Would that bother you?” the tiny girl wore an exquisite set of silk robes.

“No, I'd love to hear you play. You're very good,” Ginny said, and it was true. Despite being a child, the girl managed to play complex pieces that seemed to defy her small hands.

“Thank you,” Juliette said, inclining her head with a smile. “I'm glad you're here this summer. You make dinner fun.”

"You didn't have fun before?" Ginny asked, thinking of her own family dinners that made her laugh and smile every night. A sudden wave of longing for her brothers hit her in the chest.

"I did, but most of Mum's guests are old, and none of them wore robes like you did," Juliette said earnestly, which made Ginny shake her head. She had worn casual robes to her first dinner at Wrightman's, and never repeated the mistake. Especially since Wrightman had actually hired a tailor to outfit Ginny with at least thirty new sets of beautiful robes, which she now wore daily.

"Well, I enjoy watching you try to sneak vegetables onto my plate," Ginny said with a small grin.

"You said you liked carrots," Juliette said, looking worried.

"I love them," Ginny assured her, unable to properly explain why it gave her such pleasure to see the blonde-haired, blue-eyed daughter of Professor Wrightman avoid vegetables like a normal child. "Where's your brother?"

"With his Latin tutor," Juliette said, pulling a face. "That's my least favorite lesson."

"It'll help you a lot at Hogwarts."

"I might go to Beauxbaton."

"It will help you there as well," Ginny said. Both Demetrius and Juliette spoke such flawless English that she occasionally forgot that their father was French, and that they were raised in France.

"I'd rather play my piano," Juliette said. "Or chess, I like chess."

"My brother's good at chess," Ginny said, picturing Ron bent over the chessboard playing both the twins last June after their intense game of hide-and-seek. It felt like forever ago.

Juliette twisted on the bench to look directly at Ginny. "How good?"

Ginny couldn't help but grin. "He hasn't lost in years."

Her eyes widened. "Wow. That's good."

"Do you think he would play me? If I ever met him?" Her hope was bubbling over.

"If he ever visits, I'm sure he'd love to play you." If he survives the war, if he sticks with his best mate, if he comes through this fight with his mind and body intact. The list of conditions went on and on until Ginny made herself stop thinking of them. Being left behind played tricks on a person's mind.

Juliette smiled. "I'd like very much to play him, thank you."

Ginny couldn't help it. Sitting there in her tailored blue dress robes in that exquisite room with that beautiful grand piano beside her, a fresco on the ceiling and a chandelier hanging delicately in the middle of the room, she smiled.

"You're a very polite little girl," Ginny said.

Juliette recited, "Papa says that friends and manners are the base of every man's character."

The elusive Mr. Wrightman piqued Ginny's interest. "That sounds like something my dad used to tell me."

"You have a dad?" Juliette asked, clearly curious.

Ginny smiled. "Yes."

"Do you have any brothers?" It was as if the girl just realized that Ginny was a real person.

"Besides the one who plays chess?" Ginny teased. "Yes, I have six brothers."

Juliette's eyes widened. "That's a lot."

Ginny nodded, amused. "Yeah. We have enough people for our own Quidditch team. With one reserve."

"We own a Quidditch team! The Quiberon Quafflepunchers," Juliette said eagerly, as if it were quite the same thing to have enough siblings for a team and own one of the best teams in France. "Mum hates their uniforms; they're bright pink. But everyone says they're traditional. The captain threatened to quit if they were changed. And he's a boy."

Ginny had known the Wrightmans owned a decent team in the league a number of years ago, but they'd sold them in the early eighties. It was probably because Wrightman's husband owned the Quafflepunchers. It would have been a conflict of interest for one family to own two teams, and the family lived in France, so it made sense that they kept the local club.

Ginny had to admit that the idea of seeing a Quafflepunchers match from the owners box sometime that summer really excited her, even if it was just a pre-season match. She would ask Wrightman about that as soon as possible.

"And are they your favorite team?" Ginny asked. Juliette nodded, music forgotten.

"The Chasers came to my birthday party last year and brought me a signed Retro." Juliette obviously thought it was just about the greatest birthday present a little girl could ever receive. Ginny had to agree, and not just because she herself had been given a Retro, but also because she was a Quidditch fan just like the next witch and could appreciate a real collectors item.

"Have you ridden it yet?"

Juliette shook her head. "Papa said I had to keep it in a case until I received proper flying lessons, which won't be until I'm ten."

A house-elf appeared in the doorway, telling them all that tea was ready. It was probably for the best. Ginny didn't think she could resist

teaching the girl how to break her Retro out of its case and have a miniature lesson. She might start teaching her a few things anyway, if Gertrude agreed and if they could find a slower broom for her to work with. An old Cleansweep, maybe, which was what Ginny had learned on.

Wrightman came home later than usual that night, and settled down at the table with a glass of red wine after putting her children to bed. Ginny sat beside her with a warm cup of tea, trying to convince herself to take the potion resting innocuously before her saucer.

"They chose Scrimgeour to replace Bones," Wrightman said, her long, thin fingers curled around the stem of her glass.

"He seemed to like to take charge of things," Ginny said, idly taking a bite of an extra piece of cake Shenny had brought her. Her personal house-elf always did thoughtful things like that, and Ginny was really quite attached to him. Wrightman took a sip of her wine, and set the glass gently down on the cleared table.

"He likes to make grand gestures, but misses the details like a simple diagnostic check on the woman he was replacing as head of the MLE," Wrightman said bitterly, sighing. Herpo pawed his way across the soft, cream carpet and launched himself up onto Wrightman's lap, where he nuzzled against her. Wrightman rested a hand on his back, looking oddly sad as she watched the spritely little kitten. "I wish so much that Lily were here now."

The candor struck Ginny.

"She always knew what to do in a crisis. Everyone else was running around, lost and terrified, and resolve would just wash over her, and she would give direction to the scared, purpose to the helpless. And James Potter would stand beside her, the symbol of strength, and people believed that we would be okay," Wrightman said, and images of Harry standing in front of them at the Ministry last summer came to Ginny, of his whispered command to knock over the prophecies, of the way he would seem to suppress his own nerves before a Quidditch game to lend courage to the rest of his teammates.

“They sound like Harry,” Ginny said.

The fingers on Wrightman’s free hand glanced over the glass. “Yes, very much so.”

“Sirius always claimed that Harry was like his dad,” Ginny said, resting back in her chair. “But then one night, I found him drunkenly looking through his old pictures and he told me that Harry was just like his mum.”

“He’s both of them,” Wrightman said, sighing and rubbing her thumb over Herpo’s ear. “Painfully, accurately both of them.”

“Why do you hide your connection to them? To her?” The question had plagued Ginny for months.

“Habit, I suppose,” Wrightman said, a small, insincere smile crossing her lips. It looked like a wound, and Ginny remembered the Professor’s instinctive reaction to Mr. McGrath trying to hug her—backing g away—and the look of horror that past over her face as she realized what she had done.

“She was a powerful witch.”

“She was a Muggle-born Gryffindor,” Wrightman said, shaking her head. “Nothing like the friends I was supposed to have.”

Ginny laughed humorlessly. “Like Bellatrix Lestrangle was appropriate?”

“Yes.” Wrightman stared at the painting of a large mountain range on far wall, letting Herpo rest his tiny head against her legs. “Bellatrix was the most beautiful woman I have ever met. I thought she was what I had to be: smart and powerful and completely devoid of morals.”

“No one has to be like Bellatrix Lestrangle.” Standing wildly atop the archway above the veil, cackling as she shot spell after spell at the cousin who challenged her to be better.

"I know. Because I met Lily Evans, who had just come back from a Ball where Voldemort had killed—" Wrightman turned back to Ginny. "He had just killed your grandparents, actually. The Prewetts."

A bolt of lightening cut through Ginny's stomach. "My grandparents?"

"The Crystal Ball was an old tradition to celebrate the New Year, and all the prominent members of society were invited," Wrightman said, her soft voice rolling over Ginny. "Voldemort killed your grandparents there, and it was never held again."

Somehow, Ginny had missed those parts of the story and wondered what else she had missed. "Why'd he kill them?"

"The Dark Lord needs no reason to destroy."

"Yes, he does," Ginny said, surprised that Wrightman wouldn't know that. "That's the thing about him. He always has a reason. Whether it's stupid or nonsensical or completely anachronistic, he has a reason."

Wrightman regarded Ginny as one might a small mouse outside that didn't appear to be harming anything, but might make a break inside at any time. "He wanted to make a statement about people standing against him."

"My grandparents weren't even involved in the war," Ginny insisted. Her mum had mentioned it a lot, how her parents had been the nicest people she knew, unwilling to entrench themselves in the fight.

"But your uncles were, and they loved their parents," Wrightman said, letting the words sink in.

"Oh," Ginny said, feeling like she had been slapped. A strange wave of relief spread through her as she thought about her parents hidden by the Fidelius Charm and her brothers scattered safely across the country and continent in secret homes. All but two. One who remained stubbornly at the Ministry, and the other who was wandering with his two best mates, trying to fix the world. In the warm dining room in France, Ginny felt suddenly small.

The grandfather clock in the living room chimed.

“Lily was there that night,” Wrightman said, cradling Herpo to her chest, where the little animal yawned. “She cast a shield, saved dozens of lives, and almost died when a dozen Death Eaters sent spells at her, but never for a moment thought that she had done anything special. She thought it was what anyone would do.”

Ginny recognized the tone of her professor’s voice, that combination of awe and incredulity and pride. Wrightman had watched Lily Potter become a legend.

“Does it ever get easier?” Ginny asked. “Watching from sidelines?”

“You aren’t on the sidelines, Ginny,” Wrightman said, shaking her head at Ginny. “Just because you aren’t with Harry doesn’t mean your role is diminished. You are working in the Ministry to discover new ways to end this war.”

Ginny dropped her fork. “I’m working with a Death Eater.”

“You’re making a Death Eater see you,” Wrightman said. “You’re making Bode see that his enemies aren’t stupid, misguided children. They are intelligent, hardworking people with convictions and pure blood. You are using his knowledge to further your own.”

Ginny shook her head. “You really are a Slytherin, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Wrightman said proudly. “And some day, I hope people will stop assuming that also means I’m evil.”

“If people knew the truth, they wouldn’t see your house that way,” Ginny said suddenly, shaking her head. “It’s too complicated for it to be that simple. It was Peter Pettigrew who was the worst sort of Death Eater. It was Regulus Black who betrayed Voldemort at the end. And it was Draco Malfoy who was begging me to put it together, to stop him.”

“But he still chose to use that magic,” Wrightman said.



"Yes, he did," Ginny said, thinking of his tortured, tired face in the dungeons that day a week before the end of school. "But that doesn't make him evil, does it?"

"No, it doesn't." Wrightman took a long sip of her wine.

They sat together for a long time, each sipping their drink as Harry Potter's kitten fell asleep.

"I want to know what happened to my arm," Ginny said, her voice strong and sure. "I want to know why I feel like this when I use wandless magic."

Wrightman's expression was of pain. "You will."

"Soon?" Ginny asked, stretching out her fingers.

Wrightman shook her head. "Before the end of the holiday."

"Some holiday," Ginny said, trying to sound light. "I found out the Minster's an imposter, haven't seen any of my family except my brother who left us, and worked with the veil that killed Sirius."

Wrightman actually smiled. "Sirius would enjoy the irony."

"Yes, he would." Ginny drank the entire potion in one big gulp, feeling the cool liquid course through her body. "Did you know he wrote me a letter before he died?"

"No," she said, looking curiously at Ginny.

"Yeah, he said I made him feel happier in the house, and said he hoped he had a spectacular death, going out in a blaze of glory." The letter rested in the false compartment in the side of her trunk. "He said he expected nothing less from me."

Shaking her head, Wrightman said, "He was always irresponsible."

"He was fierce and loyal."

"Yes, he was." The professor wrapped her fingers around the stem of her wine glass. "But he's dead now, and so are Lily and Christine. So dwelling on what they might have offered the current situation is a silly exercise."

Ginny wanted to hug this tiny, repressed woman. "It's not silly to remember your friends."

Looking as sad and broken as she ever let herself, Wrightman disagreed. "It is when remembering makes me wish they were here, instead of acknowledging that they already gave enough to this fight."

They went to bed shortly thereafter, walking silently through the high vaulted corridors, a kitten cradled in Wrightman's arms.

Another month passed, and August began with a sprinkling rain that fell warmly onto the grass where Ginny laid one weekend.

"What are you doing?" asked Demetrius, standing over her with his perfect posture, confusion all over his face.

"I'm laying in the rain," Ginny said. "Join me."

"On the ground?" he asked.

"Yes," Ginny said with a grin as the boy looked furtively around and sat quickly, positively giddy at having broken a rule.

"I'm not supposed to sit on the ground in these clothes," he said.

"I'll clean you up before anyone catches you," Ginny assured him, feeling a bit like Fred and George corrupting the youth.

"Okay," he said, smiling hugely, huddled in the clean autumn rain.

"What lessons did you have today?" Ginny asked, eyes still closed.

"Fencing, history, and Latin," Demetrius recited. He was all of seven years old, and already had more teachers than Ginny had in her

entire life. She sometimes wanted to initiate a food fight with him to make sure he played. But other times—watching Wrightman embrace him before saying goodnight and seeing his smile in the morning as he recounted his dreams—Ginny just wanted to keep him as a child forever, giddy and happy and so perfectly young.

“You have a visitor,” the little boy said. “Mum said to tell you.”

“A visitor?” Ginny asked, propping herself up on her elbow. “Do you know who it is?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding happily. “It’s a boy name Theodore. I asked and everything.”

Ginny sat all the way up. “Theodore.”

“Do you want to see him?” Demetrius asked, jumping up. “Let’s go.”

They walked to the morning room, where Theo Nott stood with Gertrude Wrightman, talking about the weather with all of his limbs and fingers intact.

“It took you two months to let me know you weren’t dead?” Ginny asked, stopping in front of him.

“I’m a very busy person,” he said with his telltale smirk, and Ginny couldn’t keep herself from wrapping him up in a big hug. “I take it this means you’re glad I’m not dead?”

“Maybe,” she said, stepping back.

“Well, I’m glad you’re not dead,” he said. “It would have put a damper on my entire holiday.”

She let out a huff of breath, relieved to see him. After all, the last time she saw that face, he had been just absorbed an entire ward. “I really am glad you’re okay.”

“Silly girl,” he said softly. “Don’t you know I’ll survive the apocalypse?”

Wrightman placed a hand on her son's shoulder. "Let's give them some privacy, Demetrius."

"Do you want to draw with me?" Demetrius asked his mum, tilting his head back to look up at her with an eager smile on his face.

"Yes, I would. What would you like to draw?" she asked, leading him from the room as he talked about Treasure Island and the pirates.

"Come on, let's sit," Ginny said, motioning to the sunroom off the living room. It was Ginny's favorite place in the entire estate: large panes of windows lined the walls of the circular room, overlooking a little duck pond with tinkling water. Ginny ate breakfast in there whenever she could. "Shenny."

The elf appeared as she sat at the table.

"Could you please bring us some tea?" she asked, and the elf was gone before Theo relaxed in his chair.

"You certainly seem to have adjusted to this house well," Theo said, a smile barely held at bay.

Shifting on the soft chair, Ginny lied. "It's not a hard adjustment to make."

Theo actually laughed. "Devon would approve of the robes."

Running her hand over the soft material, Ginny said, "That's because they're gorgeous. They could probably make a hag look good."

He chuckled lowly, so unlike Harry's laugh. "They certainly make you look decent."

"Oh, stop it. Between that comment and being glad I'm not dead, I'm going to blush," Ginny said dryly.

Shenny popped back in with the tea and biscuits, leaving before he could be properly thanked.

“I forgot how amusing you are,” Theo said, leaning back and draping his elbows on the armrests. He had grown in the two months they had been apart. He had always been taller than her, but now he was positively giant, though still thin with his short brown hair. “I haven’t had much occasion to laugh recently.”

The fight went right out of Ginny as she thought over the events of the past week months. “I haven’t either.”

But where the conversation might have stalled with someone else, Theo went with the tension and emotion easily as he said, “I know you were close to the headmaster.”

Ginny had been with Dumbledore on her last birthday, actually, blowing up his office and accepting a large present of secret books to hide in her new trunk, but she still said, “I imagine it’s worse for— for other people.”

“Potter.” Theo said his name in the clipped, distant way Malfoy used to. “Harry.”

Ginny shrugged and nodded.

“Have you talked to him?” Theo didn’t feign disinterest as many would have.

“No,” she lied.

“So you haven’t had the chance to tell him that we’re dating?” he asked, causing her freeze mid-sip.

As politely as possible, she asked, “What?”

“My parents heard from a very reliable source that you and I have been dating for months,” Theo said, pouring milk into her tea and putting a slice of lemon in his.

It took a moment for Ginny to understand, then it hit her like a Stunner. “The imposter Bones.”

“You knew?” he asked, surprised.

“Yes.” That was not something that Ginny particularly wanted to talk about. Rufus Scrimgeour had become a constant plague in her life after his new appointment, always popping in for a chat to see if she had any further premonitions about people or any thoughts about Harry. If it weren’t for hurried notes from Percy warning her, Ginny would have gone mad with the sheer amount of attention being paid to her.

“I suppose that explains why you said it,” he said.

She shrugged. “I needed him to underestimate me and let me leave.”

He raised an eyebrow. “So you babbled about me?”

“Yes.” And she didn’t regret it, either.

“Well, now my parents want to meet you,” he said casually, leaning back into a stray sunbeam that illuminated his entire face.

“Your dad already has,” she pointed out. “Remind him that I was the one he wanted to kidnap and possibly kill a few weeks ago.”

Theo flinched minutely, though he covered it up well. It reminded Ginny of the first time Tom Riddle met Albus Dumbledore, but pushed the thought away.

“He remembers.”

“Then I really did complicate your life, didn’t I?” Ginny said, wincing. “Sorry about that.”

Theo grinned. “I live for complication.”

Ginny shook her head. “Obviously. Well, tell me what’s happened with you since I last saw you.”

And he did. Told her about leaving his parents’ home with a single suitcase and arriving at Devon Pierce’s to assure her that he was fine.

Looking pale and terrified, Devon had forced him to stay and tell her about what Draco had done. He had stayed there that night, then moved in with his uncle for a month, only talking to his parents via owl.

“That was why I came to the council,” he said.

“What council?” Ginny asked.

He gave her a look. “The Old Families convened in the middle of June.”

She smiled. “And why would I know about that?”

“Because it happened here,” he said simply, nodding at the large formal dining room. “Professor Wrightman held it to renegotiate the treaties and choices.”

“I didn’t—I didn’t know. My family wouldn’t have been invited,” she said, trying to remember a night when Wrightman had held an elaborate dinner that she hadn’t gone to. There weren’t many. “What did you all decide?”

“Nothing that made my parents happy,” he said cryptically, which made Ginny roll her eyes.

“You like being vague, don’t you?”

“There is little else I enjoy more,” he said, and turned the conversation to her.

That night, when Theo was leaving, he took her hand and kissed her cheek as most of Wrightman’s guests did, and repeated the gesture with Professor Wrightman at the Floo.

“Thank you for having me,” he said.

“You have been a wonderful guest,” Wrightman said. “Tell your uncle I said hello, please, and your grandmother.”

"I will," he assured her, his heavy traveling cloak around his shoulders. Despite being the middle of summer, Wrightman's house was cool as it rested high on a mountain. "And they send their congratulations on the purchase of the Daily Prophet."

Shocked, Ginny turned to her former professor. "You bought the Daily Prophet?"

Wrightman glanced over at her. "Yes."

After two months in that house, Ginny was rarely surprised by Wrightman's actions, but this seemed so sudden. "Why?"

Clasping her hands together, Wrightman said, "I had a long-standing agreement with the paper that my name would not be mentioned without my consent, and it came to my attention that a certain editor didn't plan to respect our agreement."

"Oh, of course," Ginny said, shaking her head incredulously. How had she ended up in this world of power and extravagant wealth?

"I'll be having the publishers of the Quibbler, Witch Weekly, and some other publications in France and England to dinner tomorrow night," Wrightman said.

"The Quibbler?" Ginny asked, excited. "Does that mean I'm going to see Luna's dad?"

Wrightman's face changed for a moment, but whatever emotion she wanted to express was quickly hidden. "Yes."

Ginny couldn't wait. "They live right near us in Ottery St. Catchpole."

"Mr. Lovegood is... enthusiastic," Theo said, surprising Ginny.

"When did you meet him?"

After thinking for a moment, Theo said, "The first time was probably at his wife's funeral."



Ginny and Luna had talked about her mother's death, but Ginny knew practically nothing about the woman. "Why were you there? Did you know her?"

"Her brother and my uncle are acquaintances," Theo said, clearing absolutely nothing up.

Embracing him spontaneously, Ginny said, "Be safe."

Patting her back as awkwardly as any of her brothers, Theo nodded. "I will."

Once he was gone, Ginny turned to Wrightman. "Thank you for having him."

Wrightman put a hand on Ginny's shoulder. "I remember what it was like to be a teenager surrounded constantly by adult company."

About a week after her visit with Theo, Ginny received a summons from Department Head Allen asking her to report to Allen's office at the end of the day.

"Oh! Ginny's in trouble," a Time Unspeakable said, spotting the note as he walked past. But as Ginny thought about the possible reasons why she would be asked to have a meeting with the Department Head, reprimand seemed less and less likely. Still, Ginny couldn't help but feel a little afraid as she knocked on Allen's door that afternoon.

"You may enter," the door said in a rather respectful tone.

Ginny was curious about the office of the head of the Unspeakables, but at first she was rather disappointed by the results. It looked a lot like her dad's office, except without the clutter: clean lines, neat desk, a book self with hundreds of books, a certificate of excellence on the wall. Oh! An Order of Merlin, second class, on the desk. Ginny could barely keep herself from staring at the glittering silver statuette. She'd only seen one like it, and that had been the one Gilderoy Lockheart had worn practically as a tie her entire first year. Department Head Allen used hers as a paperweight.

"Good evening, Miss Weasley," Allen said, nodding at the seat on the other side of the desk. Ginny took the hint and sat. "How do you feel things have been going for you here?"

"Really well," Ginny said, folding her hands on her lap only to notice a large smudge of green across one of them. She tried to surreptitiously rub it away. "It's been challenging and fun."

"Fun?" repeated the elderly witch. Her brown eyes peered out at Ginny from under the wrinkles that folded up her face.

"Oh, yes," Ginny said, surprised that Allen might not consider this work fun. "Working to discover exactly why time only moves forward when every spell and calculation we do indicates that it should flow in either direction, is fascinating. I'd never thought to even wonder why time and gravity affect both magical and non-magical people indiscriminately. This work has taught me to think about every day actions in completely new ways. And working in the Brain Room to determine the sequence of triggers required to make a thought skip certain default paths has also been fascinating."

Allen nodded while Ginny felt a bit foolish for babbling on too long. "Did you read about the history of the Department, as you said you would like to?"

Ginny nodded. "Yes, and the notes about how exactly they broke down the mysteries and chose which ones would connect to the other rooms were very detailed."

"You found them useful, I suppose?"

Again, Ginny found herself going on for a long amount of time about the ways that learning the process of channeling love and a scale model of the solar system changed her outlook on the processes involved in keeping the department and room intact.

"The doors leading to all the rooms are identical, which I hadn't known, but it helped me realize why Professor Wrightman spent so much time in the spinning room with the doors. If they all have the

same basic properties, it makes sense that studying the differences between them would give indications to some of the unique properties of the item in the room," Ginny finished.

"You have also studied the history of this department? Our policies?"

Ginny nodded and tried to keep the accusation out of her voice as she said, "The neutrality of the department is paramount."

"The outside world cannot be allowed to stop the work we do here," Allen said softly. "Wars come and go. Strong men, both good and bad, rise to power. Sometimes they rule. Sometimes people fight them." Allen's eyes lingered on her Order of Merlin. "But the Department of Mysteries, like Hogwarts School and Ollivander's Wand Shop, must keep working. We hire based on skill alone."

Ginny had talked about this at length with Wrightman, and while she did not agree that the department needed to hire Death Eaters to ensure their continued existence, she was willing to admit that she wasn't qualified to make that decision for the department. Amelia Allen was. So Ginny let her eyes wander back to the Order of Merlin and noticed the inscription along the bottom: *Est Completus Numquam Labor Boni*.

"It is not my award, though it rests in my care," Allen said, eyes lingering on the Order of Merlin. "Its recipient would not even attend the ceremony, and few know she earned it."

Ginny wondered if it was Wrightman's, but decided not to pester the woman with unnecessary questions.

Allen nodded. "Unspeakable Wrightman has told you part of the reason why you were chosen to work here for these months?"

"Yes," Ginny said, straightening her posture and ignoring the tension building in her stomach. "Part of the arrangement was that I had to submit to being examined."

"Yes." Allen's short hair was tucked behind her ear, and her make up was, as always, perfect.

Ginny took a breath. "This has been such a great experience, it'll be nice to give something back."

"I appreciate your sentiment."

Ginny waited a beat. "When will the first experiment be?"

Allen seemed amused, and said, "There will be no experiments on you."

That was odd. "I thought—I guess I thought you'd need to test me somehow."

Allen folded her ancient hands on the table. "We have been watching you during your stay here."

Ginny was a bit confused.

"You've work in all the rooms. We observed. We learned what we could." Allen smiled. "I called you in to talk about the results."

It felt like Ginny was in the healer's office as a young child, waiting to be told what could cause her to hiccup fire, only this time her mother wasn't sitting beside her. "Does it explain the effect of wandless magic on my body and mind?"

"Yes, Miss Weasley," Allen said, looking sad.

Over the course of the next ten minutes, Ginny learned exactly why she felt a cold, creeping sensation extending from her hand through her body after wandless magic. She learned about dreams, both hers and those of an impossibly handsome young Tom Riddle. Wanting to fight, but knowing there was no point, Ginny just let herself accept the words of the ancient director, remembering the feeling of watching Harry through the eyes in her lifeless body, helpless and weak and small.

And when Allen presented a possible solution to the problem, Ginny physically recoiled.

"I can't," Ginny said, thinking of the veil flapping in the unseen wind.

"I understand your hesitation, and I would never force you, but know that it is always an option," Allen said kindly.

"I just can't—"

A disembodied voice interrupted them. "Attention Directors, the Ministry of Magic has been overthrown. The new Prime Minister will speak with you in the main hall in twenty minutes. Be advised."

Ginny paled, giving Allen a sharp look. "Is that serious?"

"Yes," Allen said in a cold, authoritative voice as she took a deep breath. "Return to Gertrude's office. I have a meeting to attend."

"But—"

"Neutrality, Miss Weasley," Allen said, pulling on her fancy black cloak and fastening the gold buckle.

"And I?"

"Have decisions to make," she said, turning to the Floo in her office, but waiting until Ginny had left the office before leaving herself. Overwhelmed, Ginny leaned against the wall and let herself slide to the ground, resting her forehead against her knees. The world was coming apart, and she was stuck in the ninth floor of a Ministry that had just been overthrown.

Ginny returned to Wrightman's alone that night, having navigated through the jittery crowds uneasily while Wrightman led a Department-level meeting. Preoccupied with thoughts of the information that Allen had given her, Ginny mechanically stepped out of the Floo and called for Shenny.

"My house-elves think highly of you," drawled a low male voice that so scared Ginny that she didn't really hear the words before she shot a Stunner at the unknown man resting on Wrightman's couch. The

man surprised her by raising a hand and deflecting the spell easily. "It is not polite, Mademoiselle Weasley, to attack the owner of the home in which you are a guest."

"Mr. Wrightman?" she asked, looking him over. Standing well over six feet, the man wore tailored black robes with shiny buttons, polished black shoes, a gold pocket watch, and rectangular black-rimmed glasses. He had tanned skin and dark eyes with long lashes that matched his black hair.

"Monsieur de Boeldieu," he corrected, looking her over, assessing. Of course Wrightman was the professor's maiden name if she was the head of that family. And of course she had married a man who valued his family just as highly. So that was the exact wrong thing to say.

Tightening her grip on her wand, Ginny said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I have no guarantee that you are who you say."

He paused for a moment, eyes narrowing, before nodding. "Pim."

Small, older, and terribly loyal, Pim was the 'head' house-elf, if such a position existed. The elf popped in and bowed deeply. "Yes, Master?"

"Please tell Mademoiselle Weasley who I am," he said formally, eyes locked on Ginny.

"This is Master de Boeldieu, Miss," Pim said, bowing again.

"Thank you, Pim," de Boeldieu said, inclining his head. "When my wife arrives, please set the table."

"Yes, Master," Pim said, popping out of the room with haste. De Boeldieu was obeyed without hesitation.

"Does that satisfy you?" he asked, looking at her critically as he unlatched his cloak and draped it over her arm. An elf popped in, took it, and left without a word.

"Yes, thank you," Ginny said, refusing to look embarrassed for having asked for verification.

"I heard about your experience with the English Minister. It's encouraging to see that you learned from that," he said quietly.

"Thank you," she said again. "And it's nice to meet you, Mon. de Boeldieu, and be able to thank you for your hospitality."

He looked unaffected by her words as he nodded toward her hand. "My guests do not expect to face a wand when they enter my home."

"I know. I'm sorry," she said, deciding against explaining exactly how horrible this day had been. "I didn't expect a stranger to be here."

"Sit," he said, motioning toward the large chair adjacent to the couch. "I have some questions for you."

Tired from being inundated with information and change, Ginny did as he asked and settled into a thirty-minute discussion of her youth, school years, friends, and achievements. He seemed to know the answer to all the questions before they were asked.

All of that changed the moment the fire flared to life, and Gertrude Wrightman stepped out of the flame as elegantly as she did everything else. Ginny had come home from work often enough with her to know that she normally called the house-elf, took off her traveling cloak, and went to her children, but the moment her eyes landed on her husband, who stood at her entrance, it was as if she stopped breathing.

Looking just as regal and put together as ever, Wrightman walked straight to her husband and embraced him tightly, only kissing him briefly afterward before settling her small frame against his. There was a sense of relief at their reunion that made Ginny ache. Her teacher had never looked more tired than she did in his arms; it was as if she could finally show her fatigue because she trusted him to support her. They reminded Ginny, in a much quieter way, of her parents the day Arthur Weasley had returned from inspecting Azkaban all those years ago. Except Gertrude wasn't fussing or cooking. Instead, she just gratefully held him in her thin arms and he returned the gesture firmly.

It was clearly a private moment, so Ginny began gathering all of her things in order to leave the room and not bother them.

"You're home," Gertrude said into his shoulder.

"As soon as I could be," he replied. They spoke in French.

When they split, both looked more resolved, and Gertrude asked, "They're falling apart."

"Your country has a fascination with drama," he said lightly.

Wrightman smiled then—a big smile Ginny had never seen—and said, "It's good to have you home."

He took her hand. "It's good to be home."

Dinner that night was a family affair—one of the few times when no one came to visit—but the food was just as lavish as always (probably better; the house-elves doted on Mon. de Boeldieu).

"Philip said the Daily Prophet office was in chaos today," de Boeldieu said over salad that night at dinner, his children on either side of him, Wrightman beside Ginny across the table.

"He'll handle it well," Wrightman said confidently. "We chose him for his crisis management."

"But not his ability to elegantly handle pressure," he said, glancing at Juliette as she pushed the salad around her plate. The girl, noticing her father's attention, took a bite.

"I've guaranteed that the Ministry representative has the best care available in Argentina, where he and his wife have always dreamed of moving," Wrightman said easily. A slight throbbing in Ginny's right temple kept her from thinking about the fact that Wrightman had moved a Ministry employee to a different company.



He tipped his head in acknowledgement, but noted, "At least I know Phillip will never slander my family."

"Uncle Philip?" Demetrius asked, perking up. "He visited me, and gave me a toy quill that turned into a duck!"

"He's a good godfather, isn't he?" de Boeldieu asked, smiling slightly when he caught his wife's eye.

"Yes!" Demetrius said happily.

"Your mother was in the fashion section yesterday," Wrightman said to her husband, looking quite amused.

"I'm sure you kept her name as pristine as ever."

"I don't have influence over everything that's printed."

De Boeldieu actually laughed, putting his silverware on his empty plate. "Of course you do, dear."

Wrightman tried to hide her satisfaction with that response. "Still, I can't control what your mother wears to public functions."

He smiled. "Your children's grandmother has impeccable taste; doesn't she, children?"

Juliette and Demetrius both insisted that she did. They were practically glowing in the presence of their father. Ginny was just glad she had taken to using her Translation Spell constantly and could follow the conversation.

"But Auntie Regan wears some awful outfits," Juliette said, making a face.

"We don't talk badly about family, Juliette," de Boeldieu said.

"But remember that yellow thing she wore to Grandmere's 70th birthday party?" Juliette insisted.

Professor Wrightman shuddered a bit and changed the subject, clearly uncomfortable remembering her sister-in-law's awful choices.

Dinner continued with her and her family chatting. Occasionally, she and de Boeldieu would segue into bargaining with each other about something, striking informal deals. And if it weren't for the fact that they were two of the most powerful people in Europe—Ginny was fairly certain they'd renegotiated a major international tariff policy over dessert—Ginny might have said they sparkled at one another as they bantered. Their ease and friendliness with one another was beautiful.

"Papa, will you listen to me play now?" Juliette asked the moment the last dish was cleared, obviously just barely restraining her excitement.

De Boeldieu raised an eyebrow. "Have you practiced a new piece?"

Juliette nodded eagerly. It was the most animated Ginny had ever seen her. "For weeks now."

"Then I shall have to hear it," de Boeldieu said firmly as he stood. Demetrius jumped up and followed his father and sister out of the room, leaving Ginny and Wrightman to stare at the ever-lasting candles in the middle of the table. The wax reabsorbed into the candle and the wick grew to replace itself as it burned.

"He's a very nice man," Ginny said, tracing the spirals on the candlesticks with her eyes. "You and he seem really happy."

"You sound surprised," Wrightman said.

Ginny wrenched her eyes away from the centerpieces and looked at her professors even as the house-elves appeared to bring them extra dessert or tea. "I sort of am. I suppose I assumed that Sirius was—I don't know. The love of your life or something."

"He was a good friend and a good match for me when I was a teenager," she said without shame, "but he was also brash and resentful and angry. We might have balanced each other, but when I learned of his betrayal—for in my youthful arrogance, I never doubted

that he would be the Potters' Secret Keeper—I turned him from my mind."

"But you didn't marry your husband right after that, did you?" Ginny was so curious to hear about Mon. de Boeldieu now that she had met him.

Wrightman shook her head. "I had other things to attend to."

"How did you meet him?" Ginny asked.

Wrightman looked like she was about to dismiss the question, but then relented and said, "The Department of Mysteries sent me to France on the fifth anniversary of the Dark Lord's fall to enter into negotiations concerning the border guards that had been established during the war. Minister Fudge, who had been appointed that year, wanted to encourage international trade and travel."

She would have been young for that position—twenty-five at most—but with a name like Wrightman, the Ministry must have trusted that she would garner respect.

"And your husband was the diplomat you worked with?"

Gertrude nodded. "He was head of the commission that had been created to hear our argument. After the business was concluded, he had a friend of his, who was also my cousin, introduce us. We married a year later."

"That was fast," Ginny said, smiling at how clear cut and simple their courtship had been. Wrightman nodded. "What about your parents? Didn't they arrange another marriage for you after you were released from the one with Sirius?"

Wrightman's right hand curled into a ball, a small gesture of tension that was almost unnoticeable. "My parents died during the war."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." How many deaths had this woman endured?

Wrightman inclined her head. "It was a long time ago, and it was a natural disease, nothing to do with the fighting."

So she had become head of the Wrightman family just as the Blacks were at their height of power, at a time when joining Voldemort had probably seemed like the surest way to protect her family. Yet she had resisted.

Ginny looked across the room, through the archway, to where Mon. de Boeldieu was listening to his daughter play piano while his son sat beside him. She tried and failed to imagine Sirius there. The teenagers Ginny had seen in the Pensieve seemed made for one another, but now it was blatantly obvious that Gertrude Wrightman had married the right man, one who challenged her, respected her, laughed when she lied about not controlling her paper thoroughly, had powerful friends, and worked as hard as she did. They were changing the world, the two of them, and not through impulsive choices and rash mistakes, but through carefully calculated maneuvers and trades.

"I wish you'd teach again next year," Ginny said, surprising herself. Wrightman watched her through her clear, aristocratic eyes. "I know that you have important work at the Ministry. But I think you might do more good showing the pureblood students that they can fight Voldemort, too."

Wrightman ran a finger along the base of her glass. "I have enough work here, and my family must be my priority."

Not for the first time, Ginny's image of Wrightman shifted as she saw this strong, imposing woman fear for the future her children would inherit. She and her husband would stand together in the wake, hands clasped, fighting, too.

Despite having been overthrown, little changed in the day-to-day routine at the Ministry. The policies and procedures on a grand scale had been altered, of course, but Ginny still reported to Wrightman and filled parchment with notes and studied in the rooms. She told Director Allen that she needed more time to make a decision, thinking that she could find an alternate way to handle the problem.

She spent a lot of time working with Wrightman at the Locked Door those last few weeks of work, sitting on the cold Floor thinking about Harry's mother's sacrifice and the way he told her that love was the power Tom didn't know.

It was August 30th when alarms started blaring so loudly that she had to cover her ears.

"Warning. Intruders. Warning. Intruders." The words repeated at the loudest decibel Ginny had ever heard.

Luckily, the mirror that she always carried with her vibrated instead of ringing, otherwise she wouldn't have known noticed it in the chaos. Alone in the circular room, Ginny pulled it out to see Harry's face looking expectantly at her. He looked awful.

She couldn't hear what he said over the sirens, so she quickly made a sound ward around herself.

"Harry? What's going on?" she asked, knowing his timing wasn't coincidental.

"We're at the Ministry. We look too long, and the Polyjuice potion faded," Harry said. "The exits sealed. We thought—I thought you'd know how we could leave."

Oh Merlin. "Where are you exactly?"

He described himself on the third corridor of a different floor, and Ginny was already running to the intra-Floo by the time the explanation was done.

"Miss Weasley?" the guard asked when she came tumbling out, the alarm still going, though quieter.

"I want to make sure my dad's okay," she said quickly, pointing up to indicate the alarms. The guard nodded. She had to walk the rest of the way to avoid suspicion, nodding at jittery employees. The men

searching the halls weren't Aurors, but the new brand of Death Eater Aurors, whom Ginny referred to in her head at the Death Squad.

She found Harry and Ron in the empty office of a senior-level Transportation employee, and didn't even have time to properly look them over before Ron demanded, "You shouldn't have involved her."

Glaring, Ginny bit back her response in favor of saying, "I'm glad to see you, too."

Harry gave her a quick, desperate look.

"Where are your badges?" Ginny asked, looking over them.

Harry held them in his hand, so Ginny could clearly see that they read Harry Potter—Search and Destroy Mission. "We thought it would be better to not have this showing to everyone."

Fools. "That's what set off the alarm. Visitors must wear badges at all—" Ginny cut herself off. "It doesn't matter. Come here."

Thankful for the first time that Lavender had insisted Ginny learn spells to change hair color and texture, Ginny quickly adjusted Harry and Ron to look like bland, brown-haired boys. They still looked like them, but less so now.

"Put your badges on and follow me. We have to go to the Director's office," Ginny said. "Be careful, Ron. If he's there, it's Dad's friend Mr. Folger, and if he recognizes you, he could get into trouble. And put your badges back on. No matter what they say, it's better than not having them."

They followed quietly through the busy halls, people not even sparing them a glance. For all that people called Harry the Chosen One, most seemed willing to completely disregard teenagers.

"Mr. Folger?" Ginny asked, knocking and opening the door before the response came.

“Ginny!” the man said, pausing from where he was pacing. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m working in the Department of Mysteries this summer,” Ginny said quickly, feigning panic. “I heard the alarms and wanted to check on my dad and brother, but Allen said I had to bring the other apprentices with me, and now they won’t let anyone near the Minister’s office, and Percy’s there and I worked on the intra-Floo project, and I knew we had set up your office so—”

Folger magically closed his door. “That isn’t public knowledge.”

“I know, but I was hoping I could please use it. I have to know about Percy,” Ginny said, locking eyes with the man and not letting him look away.

He had known her since she was a little child, and caved easily. “Fine. But please hurry.”

“Thank you!” she said, pushing the sequence of bricks that revealed the hidden fireplace, and tossing the Floo powder in as she said the password and walked through. Harry and Ron followed quickly.

“What the hell are we doing here?” Ron whispered, horrified. “I have no desire to meet the new Minister. McNair wasn’t that nice before he—”

“McNair’s the prime minister,” Ginny said just as quietly, the ridiculous new title rolling over her tongue derisively. “He’s never in this office. He had a brand new one built a floor up.”

“Ginny!” Percy said loudly. “Are you okay? What’s going—” Then he noticed Ron and Harry, and it took him less than a second to recognize him. “You’re the intruders.”

He breathed the words.

“Percy,” Ron said, but Ginny cut him off.

“The exits are locked, and they need to leave,” she said quickly.

Percy nodded, all business. "The Minister's Floo is still functioning."

"It'll take you to a Muggle hotel twenty blocks from here," Ginny explained, trying to keep calm.

"What?" Ron asked.

"Where's Hermione?" Percy asked, glancing between them all. Like everyone, he knew the Trio came in threes.

"Her double arrived, and she had to leave. She's okay," Harry said.

"Alright, let's go," Ginny said, ushering them to the room behind the Minister's office, where Ginny had worked with a team of Unspeakables to set up the final part of the intra-Floo, an emergency exit for the Minister. Percy's wand was one of only two that could open it.

"This—thanks for this," Ron said, looking at his sister and brother. "You've been great."

Ginny hugged him. "Be safe."

"You, too," he said, extending a hand for Percy to shake. "Thanks."

He left first, and Harry was quick to follow, but Ginny grabbed his hand. "Did you manage to destroy it? Whatever you came here for?"

Harry gave a proud nod. "Yes. Three done. Three closer." He kissed her quickly, said, "Thank you," and left her again.

For ten long seconds, Ginny and Percy stared at the fire as it died.

"You're caught up in something too big for you," Percy said, standing formally beside her, their shoulders touching. "All of you."

"I'm protecting the people I love," Ginny said, taking his hand. "And you did the same."



## fChapter 16

### We Live Against the Tide

It was windy at the train station in the heat of late August, when Ginny stood alone with her bags and trunk on the Muggle platform she had never had much occasion to observe. A family passed by with a baby in a pram, young and hassled-looking as they scouted for the right platform, which were all whole numbers: 1,2, 3, 4. It was no wonder the Muggles didn't notice the world Ginny grew up in; they didn't even look between the neat numbers.

There was a war waging. A Ministry under the corrupt authority of a man named McNair, who was nothing more than a puppet to a creature of evil whose authority had reigned death down upon hundreds that summer alone. A dead headmaster and three teenagers doing something very shady to fight back.

And the Muggles remained ignorant.

"You look preoccupied," said a friendly voice to Ginny's left.

Raising her wand and eyes at the same time, a smile spread across Ginny's face with the ease of falling water when she saw her friend. "Hi, Kerney!"

"Hey, Ginny," Kerney said warmly, glancing around the train station. "What are you doing out here with the Muggles?"

"Waiting for my mates to arrive," Ginny said, standing happily even as she glanced at her watch. "Bit late, aren't you?"

"My dad hit traffic on the way here," Kerney said, which Ginny didn't really understand, so she let it go as a Muggle thing.

"It's good to see you," Ginny said.

"You, too," Kerney said, pushing her trolley alongside Ginny when she joined her. "I want to hear about your trip to France."

"It was amazing. Working at the Ministry was amazing," Ginny said.

Kerney nodded, but her shrewd eyes remained on Ginny's carefully composed face. "Okay. Beside being 'amazing,' what was it like?"

How strange that over the course of just a few months Ginny could forget that Kerney wouldn't put up with simple answers. That Kerney demanded brutal truth, as she had during their fight before the end of the year. But after a summer in the increasingly tense and unrecognizable Ministry and living with Wrightman in her proper house with proper guests who expected proper answers, Ginny felt relief at being asked to be honest.

"It was hard, interesting, secretive work that let me watch the Ministry fall apart from the inside," Ginny said, remembering that walk from the Floo to Wrightman's office.

Kerney's hands tightened on her trolley as they neared the barrier. "Bet that was hard."

"It was. And I didn't have you to complain to, either." Smiling, Ginny gave her friend an impulsive one-armed hug. As they passed through the barrier, not a single Muggle noticed them disappear.

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Unlike last September's trip, this year Ginny spent the entire journey on the Hogwarts Express in a single compartment with just three others for the duration. However, other students popped in to talk about the rumors already spreading about how Snape was the headmaster, that Dumbledore really was dead, and that two Death Eaters would be on staff this year.

"That's absurd," Kerney said toward the end of the trip when the latest rumor-spreader mentioned that she had heard Snape himself had been the one to kill Dumbledore. Ginny didn't say anything, trying to make her face give nothing away and finding it surprisingly easy after Wrightman's tutorial over the holiday. But Harry himself had told Ginny that Snape had killed Dumbledore, that he had seen it with his

own eyes. And the emotion she felt just thinking about it was explosive, though she had no desire to let the gossipier know that.

“And they say he put a ban on Muggle-born first years,” the girl said, eyes wide before she slipped away to talk to a more engaging audience.

“If that’s true, he’s dumber than I thought,” Ginny said bitingly, stomach in a tight knot of warring magic that wanted to escape and her intense desire to restrain it. “There aren’t enough purebloods to fill half the school as it is.”

“They don’t want the school full. They want it empty,” Luna said, staring out the window at the blurs of trees and dark landscape, her hair swishing around her angular face.

“That’s what my dad thinks, too,” Andy said as they felt the train begin to slow as they reached Hogsmeade. Ginny was about to say something, but Kerney’s dark expression caught her eye.

“They didn’t try anything to keep you out, did they?” Ginny asked, comfortable enough with the people around her to know Kerney would tell the truth.

“They didn’t have to,” Kerney said, tapping the toe of her shoes against the shiny floors. “Killing hundreds of Muggles sent the message pretty clearly: not wanted.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Ginny said, knowing it wouldn’t be as the train came to a complete stop, “they made it pretty clear my family isn’t wanted either.”

“My father and I have never been wanted by anyone. Except the Muggle police, and that was only for a few months last June,” Luna said, standing in too-large robes that fell clean over her hands.

“I have always wanted the police to want to arrest me,” Ginny said, happily taking up the lighter conversation.

“What would you do to be arrested?” Andy asked curiously as they wound their way through the students waiting in the corridor of the train, avoiding being the first one to leave the scarlet steam engine.

“Steal the crown jewels and use the gems to launder money to Switzerland,” Ginny replied instantly. It was one of her favorite games to play with the twins: Plan the Perfect Crime. Their mother had not been as enthusiastic about it when she had heard the twins teaching it to Ginny when she was seven.

“That’s specific,” Andy noted.

“Just because you’re boring,” Ginny said as she stepped off the train and toward the waiting carriages, “doesn’t mean you have to judge me for being awesome.”

Andy laughed. “I wasn’t aware that was what I was doing.”

They continued their weak jokes and banter as they crowded into the carriages and waited to be led to the castle by the Thestrals Ginny still couldn’t see. And she ignored the worry she felt as she caught a bit of fear in Kerney’s eyes that led Ginny to take her hand briefly.

“Those are some nice robes, by the way,” Kerney said, nodding toward Ginny’s light blue outfit when they both settled back against the carriages thin walls.

Tossing her hair a bit, Ginny said, “Well, I don’t know if you knew this, but I’m a very important person. Need to always look my best.”

Kerney didn’t laugh. “So France was really good then?”

Ginny nodded. “Everything and more.”

“My uncle lives in France,” Luna said as the carriage bumped down the road toward school. “We used to visit him, but we had to stop when the Muggles took away our visas for trying to liberate the unsung heroes of the sixth gnome war.”

Ginny smiled. "Some day, Luna, I'd really like to spend some time traveling with you and your dad."

"Would you want your own monkey?" Luna asked quite seriously, and Ginny just laughed.

"Yes, of course," she said, having no idea what a monkey would have to do with anything.

Luna beamed. "That would be a good trip."

"Let's plan it for the month after we leave school," Ginny said impulsively, glancing at Andy and Kerney, who both looked at her rather drolly, though they were a little amused as well. "I'm sure we'll even be able to convince Nadine to come with us as long as she stops missing the train."

"She didn't miss it," Andy said patiently, and explained once again that the Ryans had decided to drop their daughters off at the school in person because it fit with their schedule. No one was fooled.

Nadine, however, was at dinner when they arrive at the Great Hall. She waved them over to the seats near the back of the Gryffindor table, and Ginny was making her way over there when a pair of arms wrapped around her from behind and lips pressed her cheek.

"Darling!" the loud voice said. Jerking in surprise, Ginny was about to wrench herself away when the familiar voice whispered in her ear, "They're watching."

Eyes darting quickly around, Ginny twisted to embrace Theo as she whispered, "What are you talking about?"

"They know how close you and Potter were." He ran his fingers through her hair. "And this is the cover you created. Use it."

Pulling back he left to join his table, and she sank onto the bench beside Andy, who said, "I thought that was a rumor, the two of you."

“Hm,” Ginny said non-committally, finally giving herself the chance to take in the staff sitting at the table along the wall. More than half of them were watching her or Theo. McGonagall wasn’t, of course. No, the proud head of Gryffindor sat away from her usual spot, at the end of the table, her lips pressed so tightly together, Ginny wondered if someone had cursed her. Flitwick and Sprout looked equally unhappy from where they sat, at least three professors between any of them.

But the three professors who really caught her eye were the three who had already glanced her way: Snape and two evil-looking new comers, a man and a woman with pale skin, beady eyes, and hollow cheekbones. They looked like dark versions of Filch, which was a surprise because the man looked pretty unsettling himself. The two new professors, however, shared arrogant, mean looks that clued Ginny in first to the fact that they were going to be trouble.

The second clue was that the woman wore no outer robe, so her Dark Mark stood out proudly on her arm like a charm bracelet from a grandmother adorning her skin.

Hogwarts had certainly changed.

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It turned out the new professors were brother and sister—Amycus and Alecto Carrow—and while Amycus (the brother) was supposed to teach Defense, Alecto ruled over the now-mandatory Muggle Studies class, which the Sixth Years had all together first thing in the morning.

“Stand up!” the woman demanded when she saw the class seated on their first day. Most listened immediately, jumping up. Alecto’s voice, no matter how softly she spoke, was laced with anger and accusation; it was hard to ignore a voice like that. But Ginny did so with a lazy disregard for the woman she already loathed. If nothing else, she knew this woman was weaker than she, knew it in her very core, and the confidence she felt as a result was a little surprising.

“Mudbloods in the back,” Carrow ordered, and Ginny and most of the rest of the class looked at her sharply. Was she serious?

Apparently, because under her glare, students began to rearrange as she started taking points off everyone who dawdled. Kerney, looking furious, walked proudly to the back.

Well screw that! Ginny grabbed her things and walked right back after her friend, only to have a spell hit her in the back and make her fall to her knees.

"You aren't a Mudblood yet, Blood traitor," the professor hissed quietly in her ear, leaning so close that Ginny could smell eggs on her breath from breakfast. "You will sit in the front row."

Pushing off the floor, Ginny stood upright and glared at the woman with deep-set eyes. "I'm going to sit with my friend."

"Even you must know you can't be friends with a Mudblood," the woman said in that awful, scratching voice. "They aren't like us."

"Us? I have nothing in common with you, for which I'm incredibly grateful," Ginny spat, burning with anger at the attempted humiliation of her friend, who stood proudly behind her.

Carrow looked ready to strike, but smothered it in an instant, turning to face the rest of the class without any of the malice that had been so clear just seconds before.

"Open your books, students, to page fifty, and let me tell you about the people Ginny Weasley would choose over you," Aleto said, shooting a grey spell at the chalkboard, where numbers began growing. "Nine-hundred thousand. The number of Muggles who were brutally killed by other Muggles two years ago while other Muggles did nothing to stop it." Her wand flashed and images appeared on the board beside her. "Ginny Weasley's friends did this."

A couple of girls gagged, and even Andy paled looking at the still photo of death as the teacher described the events in excruciating detail, making two Hufflepuffs read a firsthand account of watching men slice the a young boy open.

For the most part, Ginny's rage at Carrow's new seating pattern and total lack of respect for her were enough for her to completely disregarded anything she said. But when Ginny whispered to Kerney that this was the biggest bunch of lies she had ever heard, her proud friend flinched and told her this was true. That these pictures were real. And for a moment, Ginny's revulsion could not be stemmed.

Then her common sense kicked back in at the thirty minute mark.

"We could have helped," Ginny said loudly as Carrow—Ginny refused to think of her as a professor—rattled on about the Muggles not caring. "We could have sent Aurors. Helped them."

"We, Miss Weasley? Do you want to rejoin our side?"

"Wizards and witches were just as at fault!" Ginny said, ignoring the goading.

"Did we pick up the knives? Leave the naked bodies in the street?" Carrow asked angrily. "We have more honor than that!"

"There is good and evil in both worlds," Ginny protested.

"Have you ever seen a witch or wizard do this?" Carrow asked, flashing pictures of a devastated city, where the outlines of human bodies were seen on walls. The bodies of children. "The only way we can stop these tragedies is by accepting our rightful place as rulers over the heathens, the common masses. This year I will teach you about the power you have to stop Muggle atrocities like these just by acknowledging that we are their superiors."

And as the pictures just kept coming, with a sinking, pain-filled heart, Ginny realized that she had underestimated the Carrows.

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Defense was no better.



Amycus Carrow was a short, lumpy-looking wizard with a lopsided leer and a wheezy giggle that made Ginny uncomfortable even from her seat in the last row.

He began just as ingloriously as his sister, saying, “Pull out your daggers.”

“I haven’t brought a dagger,” said a nervous Ravenclaw, looking around to see a couple of students pull theirs out.

“Then you have to share.” The man oozed mocking condescension tinged with very real amusement, as if he saw the children as strange playthings now occupying his time. “It’ll be more fun that way.”

Perhaps the worst thing was that Ginny did have one; in looking through the bag that Shenny had packed after doing her school shopping for her, she found a glittering green dagger that sparkled in the bright light of the mid-afternoon on her second day of lessons.

“Today you will all learn about real power,” he said, rocking back on his heels, hands over his large stomach. “You’ll finally learn what you are capable of, kittens, which is why the Mudbloods aren’t invited here.”

Worn and tired from the Muggle Studies class she had endured that morning—and would endure every morning for the rest of the year, apparently—Ginny didn’t immediately jump up at that.

But Andy did. “Smartest witch in the year above us is a Muggle-born. She’d wipe the floor with most of us.”

“I haven’t met her,” the man said, beady eyes wide as if to convey innocence in his frozen face. “I’d like to. Tell her that if you can. I’m sure her blood could be used most interestingly.”

Silence reigned.

“Now I’ll need a little helper to hold out their young, supple arm...”

--

“So,” Ginny said at dinner after their first Dark Arts lesson, holding her fork above the unappetizing food, “they’re evil.”

The tension at the table dissolved as they all laughed a bit at that.

“They’re certainly awful,” Nadine said, twisting around Andy to peek at the professor’s table, where Snape was noticeably absent. “They can’t really expect us to continue with these lessons, can they?”

“They can, and they do,” Kerney said, clenching her perfect teeth together.

“I can’t. I just can’t,” Nadine said, looking down the table at her sister before turning to Andy, who wrapped his arm around her. “Naomi would have cursed that woman if she’d used the M word around her.”

That’s right, Ginny thought. The eldest Ryan girl had left school the year before. But looking down the table at where young Nadia Ryan and Andy’s younger brother Stevie were whispering, she had a feeling that the Carrows would be receiving their fair share of pranks before the end of the year.

No matter what they got, they deserved worse.

“I heard they’re thinking about banning Muggle-borns from the Quidditch teams,” Colin said morosely, squashing his potato absently with his fork.

“No way,” Ginny said immediately, shaking her head. “There’s no way McGonagall would let them mess about with her team.”

“Umbridge did,” Artemis said.

“That pink frog at least had the semi-legitimate excuse that my brothers and Harry physically attacked someone,” Ginny said, poking at her bowl of fruit.

“Well, listen, don’t do something stupid liking quit the team if it is true,” Othello said, himself a half-blood with a witch for a mother and

Muggle dad. In fact, Ginny realized looking around at her friends, only Andy and Nadine were Purebloods.

“Yeah, that’s the last thing we need,” Colin agreed, “to see the Slytherins all smug because they beat our team when we had half the players.”

“Bet they’re loving this,” Othello said.

But it became increasingly clear over the next few days that the Slytherins weren’t at all as smug about the happenings at school as they had been when Umbridge had reigned supreme with her ridiculous decrees and Inquisitorial Squad.

“Of course we’re not smug,” Devon said darkly when Ginny brought it up during Potions a week into the term, when a large, easily scared new professor flitted around like a loon during class. “Most of us know the Carrows personally. There’s nothing about them to make anyone happy.”

“What do you mean?” Ginny asked, and when he friend gave her a disbelieving look, she elaborated. “I know they’re evil and prejudice and Death Eaters, but is there anything else?”

“I know that pets tended to disappear in their house, and that children were kept close to their parents’ side when those two were around,” Devon said, adding the last bit of flaxseed to their cauldron. “Even Professor Snape didn’t want them here, I heard.”

Ginny cut through the root a little too harshly and splintered the end. “Snape killed Professor Dumbledore. I don’t give a shit what he thinks.”

The rumor from the summer had been accepted as common fact, though Ginny never mentioned that she knew it was true.

“Maybe he did,” Devon said, not convinced, “but do you doubt that he’s brilliant?”

“Yes,” Ginny said automatically.

Devon gave her a long look.

"I won't compliment a man who ended someone else's life," Ginny said.

"Fine," Devon said, pointing her knife at their new professor, "but I can tell you'd rather have Snape teaching our N.E.W.T. class than this moron."

"At least he's not a Death Eater," Ginny said. Though Professor Miercoles was apparently brilliant—had won awards and had a potion named for him—he was an awful professor who was clearly in the castle under duress.

"Suppose you're right about Professor Snape," Devon said, pushing her light brown hair out of her eyes as she added nutmeg to offset the willow bark. "Suppose everything you've heard is true and he killed the most powerful wizard in four generations—a man the Dark Lord himself feared. Doesn't it tell you something that even a man like that avoids the Carrows?"

Ginny looked darkly at their now-green potion. "Yes, it does."

The antidote to the unlabeled poison was complete. "They were sent here to wreak havoc and sew the seeds of discord."

Ginny felt resolve harden in her stomach as she ladled out the liquid. "I won't let them."

"Fighting them will be as useless as fighting Umbridge was," Devon said, her small hands cleaning up the workstation. "And much less amusing."

"It wasn't useless then, and it won't be now," Ginny said, sealing the vial. She wouldn't let Harry return from fighting the larger war only to find that Hogwarts had become unrecognizable, torn in half by two bat-shit crazy professors. No, it was time to see the school unite again as they had two years before. Time for even McGonagall to

help make the Carrows and Snape realize that Hogwarts could not be quelled.

“Professor?” asked a rather tubby girl, peaking her head into the classroom.

“Yes, Miss...” Professor Miercoles stumbled. “Yes?”

The girl apparently didn’t mind having her name forgotten. “Professor McGonagall wanted to speak to Ginny Weasley.”

The balding professor clapped his hands together and scanned the room. “Alright then. Miss Weasley?”

Ginny glanced at Devon, who nodded to say she could handle packing up Ginny’s things in addition to her own, and the Gryffindor left.

The corridors slid past, soft even steps echoing against the walls to where the second year split off, and Ginny stood in front of McGonagall’s office door.

“Come in,” the Transfiguration professor said.

The last time Ginny had been in that office was when she had first heard about the offer to work at the Department of Mysteries, when the professor had looked so tense. The months in-between hadn’t been kind to Professor McGonagall, who, now that Ginny thought about it, had probably taken over the Order after Dumbledore’s death.

“Miss Weasley,” McGonagall said, watching with keen eyes as the door shut behind her, sealing itself. The professor cast four charms in quick succession. “Who was the Unspeakable who offered you a job?”

“Professor Wrightman,” Ginny said automatically. “What book did you give me for my birthday last year?”

“Transfiguration Prodigy,” McGonagall said, nodding. They stood in the middle of her office. “The rooms are all being monitored. Most of

the portraits and statues are on our side. All of the suits of armor are, and the house-elves. If you need to send me a message, do it through them. I've already told the Head Boy and Girl, but I had to call you out of class because they're watching you very closely."

A chill went through Ginny before it turned to rage that burned from her chest to the tips of her fingers. Let them watch, she thought. Let them hope she messes up. She would lead them in the wrong direction a thousand times.

"The Carrows are wary of you because your family have all evaded capture or detainment, but they underestimate you because you've apparently made a spectacle of yourself in their classes," McGonagall said, not looking displeased in the least.

"Their classes are the spectacle," Ginny said fiercely.

"Whatever the case, Severus isn't as easily dissuaded, no matter whose hand you hold in the corridors," the professor said, a dark shadow in her eyes that made Ginny realize that McGonagall had lost Dumbledore to a man she had trusted. "He knows you well, and knows how close you are with Harry."

"I couldn't tell them anything about Harry even if I wanted to," Ginny admitted, and for a moment, she thought McGonagall seemed a little disappointed.

"They won't believe you."

"Then why haven't they asked me yet?" It was waiting around for the pin to drop that most irritated Ginny.

"Your relationship with Mr. Nott has confused them, I suspect." Well, at least she was bothering them a bit.

"Why are you kowtowing to them?" Ginny couldn't help but ask.

"Because I need to be here for my students," McGonagall said, looking resolute and strong, but only making Ginny thinking of McGonagall's drawn face the night she had told Ginny that her father

had been attacked. Dumbledore pulled off the appearance of being larger than life, McGonagall always remained human. “Be careful, Miss Weasley.”

“I will, Professor.”

They talked until the hour was over about the news McGonagall had heard from her parents and Remus, and the questions everyone had about what Harry was doing. Ginny told her bits and pieces of her work in the Department of Mysteries and what had happened with the fake Minister.

And after that time, they split apart with a plea from McGonagall to stay out of the Carrows’ way.

--

The weeks passed and the cold weather set in, heralded by the worst Halloween any of them had ever celebrated. The daily Muggle Studies classes were starting to wear on everyone, though the sixth years had Luna Lovegood in all of her glory to offset the professor after Ginny was silenced.

Carrow would be making her typically melodramatic point: “And the Muggles sacrificed entire regions of land—”

Luna would pipe up: “You-Know-Who sacrificed goats that he had inappropriate relationships with.”

The class would all take a moment to blink or smirk in anticipation.

And Carrow, being Carrow, could never just ignore the comment. “The Dark Lord did not have an inappropriate relationship with a goat.”

“Did he tell you that?” Luna would ask.

“He does not have to speak of such—”

“Because it’s private, his old relationships.”

It was an argument the professor had no answer for, but continued to fight without punishment because she was clearly so confused and thrown off by Luna.

The seventh years did not share this luck in classmates, and things went from bad to absolutely awful, culminating in the most notorious rebellion since the Great Weasley Escape two years before.

"You can't make me!" Dean Thomas was yelling when Ginny arrived on the scene where dozens of students were gathered around watching the Muggle-born Gryffindor refuse to go into Alecko's classroom.

"This is the Muggle-born's version of respect!" Alecko called out, always willing to tweak every situation to her way. More students joined the crowd.

"I won't go either," Neville said, joining his mate in the middle of the drama.

"You don't belong beside him, Longbottom," Carrow hissed, and the woman radiated fury.

"I'd rather spend a year beside Dean than one more minute in your classroom," Neville said loudly. A swell of pride filled Ginny, seeing her friend stand there.

"You would join the Bloodtraitors?" Carrow asked.

"I'll join my friend and stay away from you," Neville said without hesitation.

"We're more fun anyway," Ginny called out, and nearly every set of eyes turned to her, so she grinned and pushed toward the front.

"Seems to me everyone good I know is taking an issue with you," Neville said, returning his attention to the beady-eyes professor.



Sparks flew from Carrow's wand, but Neville didn't flinch, and Ginny grew more smug. Seemed the woman had a short fuse.

"I only tell the truth," Carrow said.

"No," Neville said adamantly. "You only talk about Muggles. But we had Goblin rebellions that ruined entire nations, elf uprisings that killed by the hundreds."

"Inferior creatures!" Carrow snapped, trying to speak over him. "You are a disgrace—"

"And the magical war of 1340 was so deadly that the Muggles thought a plague was loose," Neville said even more loudly, clearly talking to the students now, who were mostly squeezing their eyes together in concentration as they tried to recall their boring History classes. Neville had been honest. "Evil is everywhere. Don't let them convince you otherwise."

"Detention, Longbottom," said the soft, cold voice of Severus Snape from beyond the crowd that quickly scattered. And the man himself with black depthless eyes stalked forward through the parting children. "For a week for all three of you."

Neville swallowed. "It's worth it, not to have to go to her wretched class."

And even if his voice shook a little on the first word, Neville's back straightened as he looked into the eyes of the man who, if the rumors were true, used to be his greatest fear.

Snape actually sneered. "Your uselessness grows every year, Longbottom."

He swished past on his way out, and Ginny grabbed Neville's hand and Dean Thomas grinned wildly as Carrow dressed them down.

--

“You were brilliant!” Ginny gushed as they walked through the corridor.

“Yeah, mate. Thanks for that,” Dean said, looking a little preoccupied.

“It was nothing,” Neville said, shaking his head. “Just—Just something I thought Harry might have done.”

Maybe, Ginny thought. Maybe that was exactly like something Harry would have done, but he wasn’t here, which she told Neville.

“Exactly,” Neville said. “Someone had to do the Harry thing.”

“What someone should do is throw those three out of this castle,” Dean said jerking his head toward Carrow’s classroom.

“Well, we have two weeks worth of detention to think of ways to drive them out,” Ginny said, and they did exactly that.

--

On the last day of their subsequent detention, Ginny and Neville—serving a Pureblood detention away from Dean—were given parchment to write out a sentence that didn’t bear repeating.

“No,” Ginny had said, tossing her parchment back on the Muggle Studies desk.

“This is your assignment,” Alecto said, eyes burning as they always did.

“I won’t write that,” Ginny said, waving at the board.

“You will both stay here until you do,” the woman hissed venomously before slamming the door on her way out.

“How’s she going to enforce that?” Ginny asked, looking warily at the door as the handle began to glow red-hot. “Ah. Okay.”

"We still don't have to write it," Neville said, looking at the ugly words on the board.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Ginny shook her head. "I'd rather wait in here until class started again tomorrow. Besides, she's just been in an especially bad mood since this is our last detention."

Neville nodded, but looked bothered, kicking her heels against the floor. "Hermione said this would happen."

"What? That you and I would be stuck in a stupid detention under that crazy wench?" Ginny asked, hoping on the desk. "At least Carrow's not crazy enough to make the quills secretly carve into our hands. She's much too straightforward for that sort of punishment."

"Exactly. Exactly," Neville said, nodding. "She does everything right out in the open, like the seating thing. That's what Hermione told me about. She said the Muggles did it all the time, made it seem like the enemies were different by separating them in class and calling them names. That way people stopped thinking about them as friends without even meaning to."

"That won't happen here," Ginny said.

"It will if people don't stand up to them," Neville said.

Well, that was easy. "Then you and I'll have to do just that."

Nodding, he still looked distant. "It should be more than you and me. We could make the whole D.A.—"

"We can't make them do anything," Ginny pointed out.

"What if—" Neville glanced at her uncertainly before plowing ahead. "Your brother Ron once told me this thing that Harry said about some things being more important than points and rules."

"Like going to the Ministry for his godfather?" Ginny said. Like breaking out of his common room to save a foolish First Year girl.

“Exactly. That’s what we should be like again. Doing the right thing even if we lose points and don’t follow the rules,” Neville said, warming up to the subject. “It’s not like the House Cup matters when it’s being handled out by three Death Eaters, so why should we care about points?”

An idea blossoming in her head even as she spoke, Ginny held out a hand. “Give me your parchment for a second, will you?”

He handed it over readily enough, and Ginny quickly casting a Charm on two of her quills to copy the words quickly.

“What are you doing?” he asked, bending his head to glare at the new ink.

“I’m making sure we have time to do something to announce a new points system,” Ginny said, running through a list of ideas that the twins had come up with but dismissed. They were too competitive to have sacrificed the battle for the House Cup to a prank.

“I think I have an idea,” Neville said, standing straighter as he explained his idea.

“Perfect,” Ginny said, grinning madly.

It took another twenty minutes for the quills to rush through the thousand sentences demanded by Carrow. It took another ten to make it to the Great Hall unseen. Fortunately, it only took one minute to convince Professor Flitwick to help them when they found him eating a bite of ice cream in the night at the Slytherin table.

The next morning, the students gaped at the four hourglasses, which now had an equal number of rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and diamonds mixed between them all. In place of the old house labels, there were four newly glittering ones: Snape, Female Carrow, Male Carrow, Students.

“Fifty points to us for being awesome,” Ginny said loudly, watching the gems glitter down into the Student hourglass.

“Ten from male Carrow for being awful,” Andy said experimentally, and the gems disappeared from the professor’s hourglass. Soon all the students understood that they controlled the points, and began loudly deducting points at will from the coldly livid Carrows. Snape looked as malicious as ever, but not like he particularly cared.

For as good as Snape might have been with Potions and spells, he was bad with people, bad at understanding that this was the beginning of a revolution.

“Well, now everything’s going to go to hell, isn’t it?” Kerney said, giving her friend a sideways look and crooked grin. She knew what it meant to lump all of the students together in a single hourglass; the rules had changed.

“Hopefully,” Ginny said, proud of how she had tweaked Neville’s original idea—vanish the Hourglasses—into this new mess.

The owls arrived early, cutting through the loud Great Hall. A regal grey old dropped a letter in Ginny’s hand that she placed on the table while finishing her muffin and listening to the chatter in the hall.

“That was cute, darling, changing the hourglasses,” said an amused voice as Theo sat down beside her at the Gryffindor table.

“Stop being gross,” Ginny said, giving him a dark look for the nickname. He’d taken to saying new ones to her every day as they passed in the corridors.

“I’m trying to be sincere, Love,” he said.

“You’re bad at it,” Ginny said.

“He always has been,” Nadine said, peeling an orange as she turned to Andy. “Remember when he tried to tell his uncle that he liked that multi-ink quill?”

“Christmas to remember, that was,” Andy said with a laugh. “But, Uncle, it really is special. It’ll help me color-coordinate my notes.”

"I refuse to feel badly about that," Theo said, picking a slice of cantaloupe from Andy's plate.

"Big surprise," Ginny muttered.

"He gave me a better gift the next year," Theo said, munching quietly on the fruit. "Speaking of which, what am I to get you, mi amor, for Christmas?"

"Earplugs," Ginny said.

"It still counts as the same endearment, even if it's in another language," Nadine said to Theo.

"Don't encourage him," Ginny said, standing and walking out of the Great Hall with her letter in hand.

"Who's the letter from?" Theo asked, keeping pace with her in his shiny shoes and pristine black robes.

"Wrightman's daughter," Ginny said, tucking it into her bag between her Herbology and Potions books to make sure it wasn't crumpled.

"Juliette?" He looked surprised, glancing down at her new bag that Wrightman had given her as a gift in June for her Ministry work. "I didn't know you stayed in touch with them."

"Wrightman writes sometimes, but Juliette's more frequent. Said she always wanted an 'international correspondent.'" Chuckling slightly at the formal speech of the child, Ginny shook her head.

Theo considered that for a moment. "Does she know you're starting an in-school rebellion?"

"I am not." She smiled. "Neville is."

He gave a teasing grin. "Oh, sure. He messed with the points system all by himself."

Now in the middle of a corridor without portraits or prying eyes, Theo's voice completely changed when he stopped walking. "They asked about Potter yesterday in class. Amycus took every one of us individually into his office. Lavender tossed around a bunch of your brothers' skiving snackboxes so that half of the class fainted before their turn, but I don't think this is over with."

"What did they ask specifically?"

"About where I thought Potter might have gone, and if I thought it was odd that Granger and your brother weren't here," Theo said, and a weight dropped down on Ginny's heart. "I told him that it wasn't, since Granger wouldn't have his protection anymore and you'd told me your brother has some deathly sickness."

"What do you mean Hermione doesn't have Harry protection?" Ginny asked, bristling.

"I mean that the Carrows hate Muggle-borns, so it wasn't hard to convince them that Granger was too scared to come back because she knew she was weaker than everyone else without Harry," Theo said, rolling his eyes. "Even knowing that she was the smartest girl in our year, they believed me. It's easy to manipulate prejudice people. Remember that."

"And all of these nicknames you've been giving me?" Ginny said, shaking away the dread that had crept up on her. "Why are you still pretending we're dating?"

"Because the Carrows are scared of my father, who still really likes me and my mother," Theo said, looking at her intensely. "You must know you're their prime area of focus, and they aren't like Umbridge, who couldn't even stop those bloody fireworks your brothers made. They're smart, ruthless, and have Snape on their side, who could curse us all to hell and back in one minute if he wanted to. It's better to have him think you're important to me because he respects my dad, too, even if he outranks him."

"Is your dad that important?" Ginny asked, thinking back on the balding man she had seen in Wrightman's ballroom.

"My dad's specialty is being indispensable," Theo said.

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "Even after botching Harry's kidnapping at the Ball?"

"Yes. Step one," Theo said, holding up a finger, "become so good at something that everyone is forced to recognize your skill. Step two, destroy anyone remotely interested in your area of expertise. Step three, never mess up. If you do, have someone else to blame. It helps if you were bosom buddies with the Dark Lord you're trying to impress."

Hello, Ginny. My name's Tom Riddle. This is my diary. Wherever did you find it? Ginny shook her head and pushed the memory away.

"I'll keep that in mind."

--

The month and a half before the Christmas holiday weaved around the students at a rapid pace, with essays and exams and homework. The Carrows continued being awful. Snape continued with his silent creeping through the castle. McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout could be seen huddling in dark corridors sometimes, only to break off conversation mid-step.

Fortunately, children's moods were much more resilient than adults', so Hogwarts never succumbed to the depressing atmosphere that had permeated the Ministry while Ginny worked there. It helped, of course, that Neville continued his bid for Most Awesome Wizard, disrupting class and interfering with Carrow lectures even in the corridors. And the D.A., despite only meeting briefly every couple of weeks, was backing all of his plays.

It was like he was a completely different person this year, Ginny thought as she left Herbology the week before break with Andy; they were the only two Gryffindors in their year to choose to continue Herbology, Ginny for the Potions applicability and Andy for the Care of Magical Creatures relations.



“Wotcher, Ginny!” Dean said, joining them from the direction of the Quidditch pitch.

Shading her eyes from the bright sun, Ginny nodded at him. “Hallo Dean. What’re you up to?”

He stopped and glanced at Andy beside her, who nodded at the older boy.

“The Aurors were disbanded,” Dean Thomas said abruptly. He’d become a surprisingly good authority on the happenings in the world. “And a couple other families were killed during the trials at the Ministry.”

The trials were a big, fat, evil joke. Every employee who might have Muggle blood was brought before a panel to prove their purity. Corrupt employees turned in co-workers out of jealousy and malice.

“A woman, too, who I thought you’d know. Head of the Unspeakables,” Dean said quickly, sounding curious.

“Amelia Allen?” Ginny breathed, doubt scratching at her chest.

Dean nodded. “Yeah, that’s it.”

“But—” The rest of Ginny’s words stopped as the surprise washed over her. Allen was old and smart and good at her job. What possible advantage could her death give anyone? Ginny felt a hollow part of herself grow. “I liked her a lot.”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you, but I thought you should know,” Dean said as gently as a boy like him could, which wasn’t very much. He looked awkward trying to be sympathetic.

“You want to sit down?” Andy asked, nodding toward a stone bench near by, which Ginny gratefully sank onto, even though it was cold enough to seep through her warm outer cloak and her nose was turning pink.

“How could they—” But she didn’t even finish her own question. She knew exactly how they managed to do what they did. Death Eaters justified every thing they did, found a reason, a cause. She still had enough of Riddle’s memories to remember how he stoked other people’s passion and twisted it to his own ends, convincing them that what they really wanted was what he wanted, and that to obtain everything they deserved, they had to make a few sacrifices.

“Things are bad,” Dean said, shifting from foot to foot. “My family’s already left for America after what happened to the Parsons.”

“You can’t let them intimidate you,” she said automatically, looking up at him as he stood on the upside of the slope leading back to the castle.

“I’m not,” he said, smiling his easy smile. “Not yet anyway.”

“What do you mean ‘not yet’?” Ginny asked.

Again, Dean hesitated, glancing at Andy, who nodded a bit, before he continued, “Neville and I’ve been talking. About what to do if things ever— If the Muggle-borns really had to leave quickly. He found a passage in the Room of Requirement we could use, if it came to that.”

There weren’t words to describe how angry Ginny was that her school had turned into this pathetic shadow of itself, and she turned to glare at the giant stone building itself as if it had played a part in this mess unfolding at its foundations.

“You could find Harry,” Andy suggested. “See if you could help him.”

Shaking his head, Dean looked sincere. “If Harry needs help, I think he’d rather it be someone who wasn’t me.”

Andy shrugged. “I don’t know. You always got along.”

Shaking his head, Dean said, “I just mean that he has her brother and Hermione. Doesn’t really need the rest of us putting around.”

None of them pretended like they thought the Trio wasn't together. The Death Eaters might have been fooled by the cover story and the ghoul in Ron's pajama's, but anyone who had lived with them in Gryffindor for six years knew that a life-threatening illness wouldn't keep Hermione, Ron, and Harry apart.

--

Ginny,

The twins' shop was burned down yesterday. They're fine, but had to leave for a while. Dad's still going to work, and so are the rest of us. Mum's a bit of a mess. I'm tasked with keeping her occupied this Christmas, so I'm taking her to Romania. Feel free to come along, but you'll probably be happier at Hogwarts.

Charlie

--

In January the sun pulled itself over the horizon late and flew early, sinking back down to obscurity, which Ginny watched tiredly as she looked out the window as she climbed the stairs. The one benefit to long nights meant more shadows to obscure her when she wandered the castle after curfew, looking to incite some trouble.

The Gryffindor sixth year girls' dorm room was dark and mostly when Ginny found Kerney sitting on the ledge of the window. The others girls were camped out with their fifth year friends for the night.

"Hey, you all right?" Ginny asked, stepping past the full-length mirror that whispered its concern for Kerney. Seeing her friend's expression, Ginny was concerned herself.

Kerney just shook her head. "No."

"Want to talk about it?" Ginny could certainly do with a good girl talk.

In the darkness, Kerney took a breath. "I'm trying very hard not to resent you right now."

Ginny must have misheard that. “What?”

“I don’t mean to,” Kerney said, standing and waving her hands around expressively, “and I know your life isn’t perfect right now with most of your family in hiding and your brothers’ shop being attacked, and I know you’re on my side, even if you manage to avoid half the detentions Neville’s now serving, but I hate that you belong here and I don’t.”

“Kerney—” Ginny had never seen her collected mate this out of sorts.

“No, it’s true.” Kerney’s voice was a tangled mess of emotions. “You’re Ginny Weasley, and even if the bad students hate you, they still see you. They look at me like— Hell, even the ones I thought were friends don’t want to sit by me in that woman’s class.”

“I sit by you.” It was a weak response, but she had no other.

“I know!” Kerney exclaimed. “I know, and it just makes me madder because you don’t understand what this is like.”

“I don’t understand? I’m right there with you, being called a traitor!”

“By choice!” Kerney yelled back. “You don’t know what it’s like. I feel like there’s something wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Ginny said adamantly, angrily.

“Then why are people I used to call friends avoiding looking at me?” Kerney asked, sinking back onto the windowsill, and Ginny grit her teeth, wanting to deny it. But a Ravenclaw they knew well had actually sat across the room in Carrow’s class today, a bruise on her face from the hateful teacher, who smiled like a cat to see the new seating arrangement.

“Some people... some people just aren’t made for fighting,” Ginny said bitterly, trying to accept that fact herself.

Kerney’s hands were shaking. “But you’re the opposite, aren’t you?”

Ginny tensed, gearing up for another row.

“You and I—we ended last year with a fight,” Kerney said, looking questioningly up at her friend. “With me telling you everything you did was wrong.”

“You told me I was making bad choices, and that you would always be my friend,” Ginny corrected. “It was a good fight.”

“But this year, we didn’t even talk about it, or about your new outfits and Pureblood look and clearly fake boyfriend, because suddenly when everyone was attacking me, you were back to being my best friend,” Kerney said, shaking her head and looking down at her hands for a moment. “Why do you do that?”

“You were always my friend,” Ginny said.

Kerney shook her head.

“You’re a good person, and you deserve better than this,” Ginny said, kicking her four-poster. “We all do.”

Kerney began to really cry, then, and Ginny hugged her tight until the tears stopped.

“I’m going to leave,” Kerney whispered after a minute. “With the next group of Muggle-borns that Neville takes.”

Ginny’s heart felt like it had been torn. She had never imagined she would hear those words from Kerney Scott, who had said Voldemort’s name before any of her friends, who’d waved off Olivia Flint as irrelevant. Who had lost her Prefect status this year under the new rules and never said a word. Who had been relegated to the back of the room. Who had been systematically torn down by verbal assaults of two professors who didn’t deserve the title.

“Don’t hate me,” Kerney said.

That wrenched Ginny out of her train of thought. “What would I hate you for?”

“For quitting.”

Ginny shook her head, blinking back tears. “You’re not quitting. You’re taking the battle elsewhere.”

To the place where nearly all the Muggle-borns had gone, where Dean and Sara Jane had gone, where almost all the Muggle-borns (save the really stubborn, foolish ones like Colin) were safe.

But Ginny would dearly miss her friend.

And as the nights went on without Kerney, Ginny did as she did every night before she went to bed: held her little mirror in her hand and tucked it under her pillow, ready to wake at a moment’s notice should Harry call.

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The cold days of winter passed, with the brightest spot in everyone’s day being the arrival of the Quibbler, which never failed to laud Harry Potter, and make absolutely ludicrous claims about the Death Eaters and Voldemort—You-Know-Who’s Lovechild Found!; Minster a Fake, Real One Dead; Potter Thwarts Death Eater Plan; Grintgott’s Break In and Dragon Ride Escape; Dwarves Side with Potter. It made everyone smile, and a few openly laugh. Luna’s esteem grew daily.

Until, of course, Ginny spotted the Carrows floating her friend out of the Ravenclaw dormitory in the middle of the night.

“What are you doing?” Ginny demanded automatically, stepping into the light.

“You should be in bed, Weasley,” Snape said from his spot in the shadows beside her. She hadn’t even seen him.

“What are you doing with Luna?” Ginny stalked forward, only to have Snape cast a spell blocking her way.

"Her father refused the Dark Lord's demands." The fake headmaster sounded calm and cold. The Carrows kept walking further and further.

"Luna!" Ginny yelled. "Luna, wake up!"

"She'll wake when we want her to," the Carrow woman said bitingly from the end of corridor, placing her craggily hands on Luna's forehead. She looked like an angel, her blonde hair falling to the ground.

"Luna! Luna! You can't take her!" Ginny yelled, clawing at the invisible barrier, reaching for Luna's limp form. Ginny's hand struck out and a wandless spell began to form when Snape's long fingers wrapped around her wrist and yanked her backward.

"Do not be a fool!" he snapped, cutting her off.

She tore herself away from him and his dry, cold fingers. "I won't let you do this!"

"It's already done."

Her hand rose again, but his wand was at her throat before she was prepared, his eyes glowing with menace.

"I'm not as forgiving as Dumbledore, or as convinced that you are worth living as Wrightman," he hissed as if he had a right to speak either name. "Killing you would spare me the threat you pose. So give me a reason. Try another wandless spell."

Anger coursing through her, a cold fury made her absolutely still even as her glare intensified. "Don't pretend like you want this thing kept dormant."

His wand point pressed harder into her soft neck. "I have no desire to deal with two dark lords."

"It'd be twice as many to love for you, wouldn't it?" She had lost all reason.

“Don’t test me.”

She wanted to burn him up, this man who wasn’t fooled by a charming Tom Riddle, but actively chose to follow the man Tom had become as he led them all through hell.

“If anything happens to Luna, I will crack your wand in two and kill you myself.”

“Threatening someone smarter than you isn’t a good idea.” He looked beyond angry.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said, turning and walking down the path the Carrows took, Snape’s barrier shattering at will, a coldness seeping through her. Foolish, she knew, but inevitable. She couldn’t keep all of her anger inside.

And when she pulled out the Marauder’s Map and couldn’t find Luna, she put her anger to good use for twenty minutes of wand-wielding destruction of the Carrows’ offices.

“Ginny?” Andy’s voice was curious in the doorway.

She sat huddled on the ground in the midst of splintered wood and debris.

“What happened?” he asked, stepping around a broken desk to stand beside her. “When you didn’t come back from the kitchens, I tried to find you, but— Have you been here the whole time?”

“No. I came here to break things.”

“Why?”

To hurt them, shatter them, make them feel as ineffectual as she did when she watched her friend float under their hands.

She swallowed, looking back at the books across the room. “They took Luna.”



“What do you mean?” His tone was controlled horror, because he knew exactly what she meant.

“Her father wouldn’t print what they wanted him to, so the Carrows took her to punish him, and Snape—” She shook her head and held her knees, thinking of the threats Luna had told her about receiving like they were the inside of a purple marshmallow. Why hadn’t Ginny taken them more seriously? “I couldn’t help her.”

He sat next to her on the ground. “Oh Merlin.”

“She was just floating away, and—” Tears and pain locked up her throat, and Andy pulled her against him in a hug. “I’m losing them all, one by one—my friends—and I can’t do anything to stop it.”

“They’re strong girls, Luna and Kerney. They’ll be okay,” he said, weaving the story they would have to tell themselves to survive this giant mess of a year. How had their parents never told them how bad war could get? How sneakily the pain could slip into their lives, through even the thick walls of Hogwarts. “Luna’ll drive them nuts after a day.”

“She’ll be alone,” Ginny said, unwilling to submit to the fantasy yet.

“She’s never alone,” Andy murmured into her hair. “Her mother’s with her, like mine’s with me.”

Oh, Merlin. How the world was broken.

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In the weeks that followed, Ginny Weasley and Neville Longbottom made it abundantly clear they would not stand for Luna’s treatment.

More surprisingly, the rest of the students joined them in their revolt against this latest injustice, rallying around Loony Lovegood, whose father wrote the only honest journal they knew. Besides, Luna was absolutely harmless, the Ravenclaws said. Even funny, when she wanted to be. And she was Harry Potter’s friend who was just the

latest in a string of sacrificial lambs now that the Muggle-borns were gone, sneaked out by Neville himself as the Carrows gleefully talked about weak Muggle blood.

In Luna's absence, students began a kind of campaign of remembrance by imitating her in class.

"Today, I will show the physiology of a Muggle brain, and why they are incapable of basic human functions," Carrow had said that morning at the beginning of class.

"The Greeks stole the word physiology from the Mermish word for sex," Ravenclaw Rachel Dunwoody piped up in all seriousness.

"No, they didn't," Carrow snapped, because above all else, she hated nonsense and tangents, and couldn't help but correct mistakes.

"Yes they did. It was part of the negotiations over the Lockness Monster's territory," Andy said earnestly.

"No, it wasn't. Where have you learned your history?" Carrow was slowly unraveling in the face of their nonsense.

"From the invisible squirrel who whispers so gently in my ear," another student added as they all did every day, coming up with increasingly absurd things to say until Carrow, freaking out at how wrong the children were, finally made them leave. Once, Devon Pierce managed to push Carrow to that point with her very first comment—"And that's the pixie mating ritual. Were you invited to take part in one? That's a huge honor, but it's too bad about your toes being sacrificed; maybe Professor Snape could make you a potion to help with that. I heard there's one that will make you turn pink and numb but involves a human sacrifice."—which was so impressive that all the students congratulated her on it as they left.

Amycus Carrow didn't rise to the bait as well, but since he was just as meticulously organized as his sister, issuing a detailed syllabus of all the spells they would learn, the sixth years organized study sessions akin to what they had done for Potions finals for so many years to study ways to undermine his ability to demonstrate spells.

It meant studying a lot of Dark Arts to learn their weaknesses, but a lot of Defense as well.

McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, and Pomfrey even helped when the students had difficulty thinking of ways to botch Carrow's spells. They didn't help overtly, of course, but if a student happened to ask how one might stop a curse that led to endless bleeding, and McGonagall suggested transfiguring something into a fake arm with congealed blood that wouldn't spill when a student was asked to volunteer to be on the receiving end... well, that was just because she was thinking aloud.

Still, not all their efforts were fruitful.

Their efforts to unseat Snape were the most difficult, since the man was almost coldly inhuman. Deciding to steal the sword of Gryffindor was Ginny's idea after she and Neville were called into the headmaster's office to discuss their behavior and saw it gleaming on the wall behind the desk.

(Ginny was still secretly mad at the headmaster's office for granting Snape access to it at all; if it banned Umbridge, why not do the same to Snape?)

Thanks to the Marauder's Map and some suggestions from the twins, the sword of Gryffindor was now safely in the Room of Requirement.

Thanks to Snape being a mean bugger, Neville and she were in detention for absolutely no reason other than that he knew they had been part of the group who stole it, even if he had no proof.

"Admit your role," he commanded as they stood in his office mid-day on a Saturday, serving their latest detention.

"Student," Ginny said automatically, thinking that while Snape was a rather scary man, Charlie in a temper had him beat at this confession game.

"If you continue to disobey the Headmaster," Alecko Carrow said from the back of the room, "we will have to have personal conversations with your mother, Weasley. And your grandmother, Longbottom, since your mum's mad, isn't she?"

The mocking tone change something in Neville's eye, but Ginny took his hand and made him look at her, and she was surprised to see him confident amusement.

"I'd like to see them try," Neville said, making Ginny smile.

"Enough!" Carrow yelled, less subtle and stable than Snape even on her best day.

"Longbottom, go with Carrow," Snape commanded. The older boy left reluctantly with the professor, glancing at Ginny over his shoulder as he went. "You can kiss her later, Longbottom!"

Ginny scowled in her comfortable seat across from Snape. She would have thought he'd change the furniture from Dumbledore's old stuff. She would have, if she had been forced to work in the office of a man she had murdered.

"You stole from me," he said darkly, hate pulsing out of his very body in the large blue chair where Dumbledore had sat when he gave Ginny Sirius's letter two summers before.

"I was asleep the whole night, sir," Ginny said coolly, still hating him for keeping her from Luna, for killing Dumbledore, for sitting there behind that desk and embodying all that was wrong in her life.

"I'm not talking about that stupid sword," he snapped. "I'm missing seventeen ingredients from my personal store."

Why did he have to notice that so quickly? Ginny suppressed her reaction. "And?"

"And none of the other brats who broke in here with you would ever be able to imagine a use for a sliver of human heart," he said, leaning forward on his pale arms.

“And I would?” She wanted to squash him.

“Don’t play the fool, Weasley.” His eyes narrowed. “What are you planning to make?”

“A potion to banish false headmasters,” she said snidely.

He stood angrily, looming over her even from the other side of the desk. “You will tell me now, you insolent brat!”

A soft, polite voice near the door spoke: “That’s a forceful way to talk to a child.”

They both turned sharply, wands drawn, to face a dark-haired woman standing with her hands lightly clasped in front of her, holding her purse. She had entered the room through the door left ajar so silently that neither noticed, without even her wand in hand.

“Samantha,” Snape hissed, wand hand back on his desk; Ginny didn’t recognize her at all, and remained tense despite how non-threatening this pretty woman looked. “What are you doing in my school?”

“It was mine once, too,” she said softly, turning her head slightly down and to the right, quiet and unassuming, like she didn’t want to have two people staring so intensely at her. But with her dark brown eyes and thick, long brown hair falling stylishly around her sculpted face, she was so damn beautiful that Ginny figured she must be used to the staring by now.

“Your friends were arrogant enough to think so,” Snape said, “but I am headmaster now.”

Samantha raised her soft brown eyes to watch him.

“You have no authority here,” Snape said to her silence, igniting Ginny’s curiosity. Why was he so defensive?

“I have none anywhere, Severus,” she said, still quiet, with a refined accent and enunciation.

“Then leave.”

Looking small, she said, “I wanted to meet my son’s girlfriend.”

Snape pounded his hands against the wooden desk. “And you knew she was here how?”

Samantha’s shoulders raised a touch. “A little bird told me.”

Both adults turned to Ginny, who was so caught up in analyzing the woman that it took her a moment to realize that they were talking about her, and who Samantha must therefore be: Mrs. Nott, Theo’s mum. She was as beautiful as Wrightman said she was, thought Ginny irrationally.

“She’s serving a detention,” Snape said.

Samantha lowered herself onto a chair in the corner without wavering. “I’ll wait.”

“I won’t have you here,” Snape said with so much authority that Ginny thought this timid woman would surely leave. She could see how Samantha Nott had ended up a Death Eater’s wife: pretty, meek, and shallow, she would be a perfect companion to someone trying to kill hundreds of people.

But she surprised Ginny by lowering her head again, as if in submission, while keeping her eyes on his. “Please.”

“I owe you no favors,” Snape said, impressing Ginny just by not giving in. She didn’t imagine there was very much that men wouldn’t do for Mrs. Nott if she asked it of them.

“I’m not asking for one, Severus,” she said politely. “I only wanted a chance to speak with her, and I was in town today. Should I return tomorrow?”

Snape heaved a sigh of irritation. "You will serve this detention tomorrow, Weasley, where you will list every potion that each of my ingredients could be used in unless you admit your purpose."

"Yes, sir," she said, standing. It would take hours.

"Shall we walk?" Samantha Nott asked, looking toward the open door.

So the strange pair left the spiraling stairs and gargoyle, but as the corridors slid passed, Ginny felt like they were waiting for something, when suddenly Mrs. Nott pushed a portrait aside with a whispered word, and opened a secret passage way Ginny hadn't known about before, motioning for the younger girl to hurry. A dark set of stairs curled around one side, lighting up as Samantha rose to the middle, Ginny joining her.

"Mrs. Nott, I don't understand what—"

Samantha Nott turned to Ginny with suddenly bright, clear eyes that seemed to look into a person's very soul.

"Gertrude Wrightman died this morning, and you're going to attend the funeral with my family on Tuesday.

And the year stopped moving.

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## Chapter 17

Mrs. Nott

Gertrude Wrightman's funeral fulfilled all of the requirements of proper Pureblood tradition as if someone checked them off of a neatly written checklist: It took place outdoors on the Saturday following Wrightman's death, near the estate where her parents had been laid to rest, her magic dispersing through the trees as was proper. Her children sat in the first row of chairs beside their father, small and confused and very, very sad. And the family processed out first, leading the guests to the luncheon.

But sorrow wasn't the prevailing emotion of the day.

"Sadness wasn't high on the list of emotions Wrightman admired," Theo said to Ginny when she mentioned it during the reception. A large, brightly lit room had been rented out at a nice club with caterers and flowers.

"I know, but--" Ginny shook her head, her long red hair hanging loose. "It feels like people are furious."

Theo's hand curled around his glass. "A well respected witch from a good family was murdered."

"Ginny, Theo, I'd like to introduce you to Ian Taler," Mrs. Nott said as she walked up to them with a thin, handsome man with wire-rimmed glasses. The man shook Theo's hand and kissed Ginny's, making small talk as Mrs. Nott quietly looked on.

If Ginny were just meeting them, she would have to assume Theo's personality came from his father, since his mother hadn't said more than a few sentences and certainly nothing beyond dim-witted introductions.

The woman hid her intelligence well as she politely introduced a slew of people—Christian Knowles, Thaddeus Lelios, and a Russian aristocrat, among others—but Ginny had seen Mrs. Nott when her veneer of passive stupidity had been stripped away. Their



conversation at Hogwarts (and the subsequent negotiations regarding Ginny's attendance at this funeral) colored the rest of their interactions. It made Ginny think of something Luna had said to her once: "Half a thought isn't very good for anything. Unless it's better for people to think you're stupid. But that usually takes a full thought and a lot of effort, too."

After breaking the news of Wrightman's death to Ginny, Mrs. Nott had insisted that Ginny attend with her since she was dating Theo. Mrs. Nott had been the one to give Ginny a Portkey and arrange for her to have the day off (though how she managed that with Snape, Ginny could only guess). She'd been the one to write Ginny with the instructions about what to wear, where to sit, and unspoken rules of interaction with her husband. Luckily, the last point hadn't been an issue since Theo's dad hadn't deigned to join the ceremony. In fact, there was a complete dearth of recognizable Death Eaters.

"Ginny?" asked a melodic voice behind her, causing her to turn away from the conversation between Theo and Mr. Taler, Mrs. Nott beside them.

"Mrs. Unger," Ginny said, glad that she had such a sponge-like memory for faces and names. "How are you?"

"A little sad today," the Frenchwoman said, shrugging a shoulder. "But otherwise better."

Ginny nodded. "I'm glad to hear that."

They had met at Wrightman's house that summer, when guests and dinner parties were more common than gnomes in a garden.

"I am hearing many things about the state of your country, and a man who would be king," Unger said quietly, a wine glass held in her stiff, tough fingers.

"More evil overlord than king," Ginny murmured, thinking of the teenage Riddle who spoke of his great ambitions.

"Yes, most of the rumors tend to agree on that."

There was a moment of tenseness when Ginny glanced across the room and Unger tapped her nail against the glass.

"I also heard that my friend's death came about because of her resistance to such a notion." Unger's soft, precise words didn't match her hard-lined face and steely eyes.

"I've heard similar rumors." In fact, the rumors seeped through Hogwarts faster than a Firebolt in a dive. Students of all houses could be seen in corridors whispering quietly, urgently, nodding that yes, Professor Wrightman was killed. Yes, Gertrude Wrightman, head the Wrightmans. Yes, the Slytherin. And the biggest shock—the thing that had the Slytherins tense in their seats in the Great Hall, unwilling to relax—was the fact that Voldemort had apparently killed her himself, in one of her homes when she did nothing to provoke it.

Unger's jaw twitched. "I never cared for Machiavellian tactics, but their efficiency cannot be doubted."

Ginny's eyes wandered over to the large portrait in the corner of the room as she remembered the way Wrightman yelled at the Ball about how this was the future Voldemort promised: a burning world with no respect. Her death seemed to support that.

"The other rumors that I have heard are intriguing as well," the woman said even more quietly, "and Miss Delacour suggested you could verify them."

Mrs. Unger, who was the French Minister of Finance, had mentioned knowing Bill and Fleur last time she spoke with Ginny.

"What's the rumor?" Ginny asked as the older woman nodded at a couple walking past.

Her voice still quiet, but now trying to sound lighter, she said, "It has been suggested that your Ministry is relying not on the Aurors who have dwindled in numbers, and not on a fascinating secret society that no one can quite name, but rather on a child not much older than you."

"I wouldn't know what my Ministry's plan are," Ginny said, grief and anger creeping into her tone. "All I know is that good people in power keep dying."

After hearing the news of Wrightman and Amelia Allen's deaths, Ginny had violently rejected the new restrictions regarding her whereabouts and Flooed over to Ottery St. Chapel and practically run the whole way home, where her mum had wrapped her up in a big warm hug and let her cry into her shoulder. And when her dad came home, Ginny wrapped her arms around his waist and held him tightly, unable to ask him to quit his job just because she was scared, unable to vocalize the one thing she most wanted to say: Please don't die; I don't know how I'd keep going if you did.

So instead, she had stayed the night, dragging her warm squishy blanket down to the living room, where she curled up on the couch and talked to her parents until dawn, when her eyes slid shut. She'd gone back to school the following day, wishing she had been able to talk to Harry, too, because he probably needed a day like that himself, venting to someone he trusted.

She hoped the Trio was safe.

"Ginny," said a voice, pulling her out of the memory with a soft touch to her lower back. She twisted to see Theo standing beside her. "I'm going to go speak with Monsieur de Boldieu. Join me."

"Oh. Of course," Ginny said, glancing at Madam Unger. "I have to go."

"Of course," she said, nodding. "My job offer still stands. We need smart people in my country."

"Thank you, but so does mine," Ginny said, and they parted ways.

"This way," Theo said, guiding her through the crowd. There were so many people in this room that it felt like the Great Hall at Hogwarts, except full of adults and angst. The atmosphere felt like crest of a

wave, tension building higher and higher until that moment when it would finally break and drench all of the people in its wake.

"I was going to wait to talk to him," Ginny admitted as they passed a tall, good looking older man with a serious face talking to Theo's mother.

Monsieur de Boldieu was in the corner of the room, where a line of people stood waiting to offer their support and talk for a moment about how lovely the funeral had been. He stood stiff and regal, grief practically drowning in his hard, dark eyes.

"I heard Lucius Malfoy sent a bouquet that De Boldieu refused to show," a woman said quietly as they got stuck between two large groups looking over at the elaborate flowers on display

The woman's husband didn't bother to lower his voice. "I wouldn't either. I heard he told Iago Nott to stay away."

"I'm surprised he let Samantha attend," the woman said, and Ginny took Theo's hand to give small squeeze. It was hard to hear people talk about your parents, no matter your own issues with them.

"She was a childhood friend of Gertrude's. We were all in the same year at Hogwarts," he said, shaking his head. "She could have done much better than Iago; he was so much older."

"She never claimed much for intelligence, Kevin."

Theo weaved past the couple, and soon enough Ginny was looking into Monsieur's sad, tired, angry eyes and telling him how sorry she was for his loss.

"Thank you," he said stiffly, his shoulders tight. "I'm glad you came."

"Professor Wrightman was very good to me," Ginny replied, trying to find the words to explain exactly how much she had liked her professor by the end of her internship.

“Yes, she was,” he said, his mouth pinched. “My daughter wanted to see you.”

“I tried to find her earlier,” Ginny said, thinking of Juliette in her fancy, formal robes who had kept glancing to her left during the funeral, where her mother should have been sitting.

“Demetrius and she did not need to be here for this,” he said, sounding tired, as if this entire affair of talking to people was nearly too much for him—a seasoned politician and ambassador—to handle. “They are in the sitting room with my mother and sister.”

“I’ll visit them now,” Ginny promised.

“Thank you.”

Before she would leave with Theo, who had already conveyed his condolences, she hesitated. “I know it might sound hollow, but if you need anything I can provide, let me know.”

The tall, dark-eyed man looked seriously at her for a moment. “I am glad you are not what I imagined when my wife first mentioned your visit.”

There didn’t seem to be an appropriate answer to that.

“Take care of yourself, Miss Weasley, in these darkening times,” he said, nodding at her as the line pressed forward and she side-stepped out.

Back in the crowd, Theo asked if she wanted to eat, but she declined.

“I’m going to go visit with Juliette and Demetrius,” Ginny said, nodding toward the exit.

“Then I am going to go speak to old friends,” he said, glancing around the room of beautiful, important people.

“Okay,” Ginny said, and they slipped apart as Ginny summoned her old house-elf Shenny to lead her in the right direction. The elf was

uncharacteristically silent, eyes filled with tears, and that was just strange for Ginny, who let her mind wander to her earlier conversations with the Ramseys, who had come and gone already, and other old acquaintances. Andy's family had sent a large bouquet of roses for display and a lovely card.

But thoughts of cards and guests and friends fled her mind when she pushed open the sliding door to the sitting room, where two small children sat on a large soft couch that dwarfed them, two lovely older women sitting beside them.

Juliette was the first to stand, and was soon crying pathetically, hugging the taller Ginny, and over the girl's shoulder, she saw Demetrius's lip tremble, and after a summer wishing she could make these two act like normal children, Ginny wished for nothing more than the ability to make them hurt less.

Ginny stayed in the room with Wrightman's children, sister-in-law, and mother-in-law for a long time talking. Long enough that the group found reasons to smile, and a couple of reasons to laugh.

"Ginny," called the soft, melodic voice of Mrs. Samantha Nott as she entered the room a long time later. "Most of the guests have left."

"Oh, alright," Ginny said, glancing at the women and children in the room, and hugging the kids tightly. "Write me often. I love your letters."

"I liked the one you sent me that exploded into pink paper pieces for my birthday," Juliette said with a smile.

"And mine with the little Snitches was brilliant," Demetrius said with a grin.

"I'll try to make sure all of my letters are that cool, then," Ginny said with a smile, standing and conveying her thanks to the adults, who surprised her by holding her hands warmly and kissing both cheeks.

"Thank you for visiting my grandchildren, whose friends are too young to help," the grandmother said, and the aunt nodded before they

turned to Mrs. Nott. “And it was nice to see you again, Samantha. I would like to have tea with you soon.”

“I’ll send an owl in the morning,” Mrs. Nott said, inclining her head.

Ginny and Mrs. Nott passed through the house and, in their tightly wrapped coats, made their way outdoors. It wasn’t until they were halfway through the garden and already looking at the frozen lake, however, that Ginny began to wonder what was going on.

“Where are we going?” It seemed unlikely that the woman was leading her to an ambush or something, but Ginny stopped walking nonetheless.

“To the Portkey position,” Mrs. Nott said in that stupid tone of hers that grit on Ginny’s nerves, but her sure footsteps remained quick and purposeful as she put a hand on Ginny’s elbow and forced her to follow.

“Where’s Theo?”

“He went back to Hogwarts. To study for an exam, I think. I said I would show you out.”

As if he would trust her. “Really?”

“Yes,” she said, and didn’t slow her pace in her high heels even as they reached the edge of the frozen lake and stepped onto it, when suddenly her hand dropped from Ginny’s arm, and the façade of blank stupidity melted off her face, leaving a shrewd woman in her place.

“What are we doing on—” It took Ginny longer than it should have to piece it all together. “You’re being monitored?”

“Tracked, yes. I don’t know about listening spells, but I always assume so,” Mrs. Nott said, all the vapidness gone.

Half the reason her brothers and she enjoyed having the little pond behind their house so much was because tracking spells, such as the ones used to monitor underage magic, didn't work on ice.

"We don't have long to speak," Nott said, her full lips pressed together. "He'll wonder what happened, and I don't want him to know I'm resisting."

"Your husband?" Ginny guessed.

"Yes, and he has a tracking spell on Theo as well, so keep that in mind," Mrs. Nott said, pulling a roll of parchment and a velvet jewelry box out of her pocket and enlarging them. "I need you to give this letter and necklace to Harry Potter."

Ginny's face froze and her hands remained at her side. "I don't have contact with him."

Mrs. Nott pushed the objects into Ginny's hands. "You have a better chance of speaking with him than I, and he needs these. Let him know the locket is a replica of one I own. That's very important."

"You— you are the most confusing person I have ever met," Ginny said honestly. "Barging into Hogwarts to force me to come here, acting like a moron in front of all of these people, and now dragging me out onto the ice to demand I do something for you."

"I'm not demanding. I'm asking," she said, her wide brown eyes so clear and honest that Ginny couldn't help but trust her even as she wondered how many people this woman had fooled.

"Why?" Ginny asked, looking up from the strange gifts she was given. "Why do you act like you don't understand anything?"

"People underestimate beautiful, stupid people," Mrs. Nott said simply, and Ginny couldn't even argue that point. How often today had she seen men (and women) watch Mrs. Nott with admiration for her looks, but never speak to her of anything of import? She was a pretty doll to watch but not interact with.



“Does Theo know this is an act?”

A brief look of resolve colored Mrs. Nott’s eyes. “I don’t know. I—We don’t have time to talk about that. You need to know that the parchment contains a list of names of people Harry can trust if he needs to.”

Unrolling the parchment, Ginny glanced over it and a few people stood out. “These are—”

“Later. Now the locket—”

“—is a fake, I know.”

“It’s more than that, but I think he knows that,” Mrs. Nott said, her eyes moving rapidly across the locket. “Alright?”

“I don’t know what you expect me to do.”

“I expect you to tell him exactly what I told you, if you have the chance, because these things could save his life,” Mrs. Nott said firmly, brown eyes narrowed at the shorter girl.

“And why would you care about that?”

“Because he’s Harry Potter,” Mrs. Nott said entreatingly. “Isn’t that reason enough?”

“No,” Ginny said.

Beautiful Samantha Nott’s hands fell to her side. “He’s a hero, Miss Weasley. How often do you meet one of those? How often do you have a chance to help them?”

Not enough.

“You’re married to a Death Eater,” Ginny said, noticing the way Samantha Nott failed to show any emotional reaction to the statement, her face stiff as if cut from stone. “A man who, in fact, recently tried to

kidnap my friend. Presumably so that he could be tortured and probably killed.”

The silence was infuriating.

“I don’t trust you,” Ginny said plainly, holding up the parchment and necklace. “And I don’t trust these things.”

In the cold, bright day, the two Gryffindors locked gazes, and though she should have expected it, Ginny was surprised by the strength and resolve in the unflinching woman across from her.

“Consider this,” Samantha Nott said at last in her polished accent that floated above the wind. “The little I know about you is filled with half truths and secrets. Your house is Unplottable. Your family unreachable. And the only information I truly know about you is that the Dark Lord is terribly interested in your wellbeing for reasons no one knows.” She nodded at the objects in Ginny’s hand. “And yet I gave you two things that would be considered an outright betrayal of my husband and his beliefs. Things that could warrant my death.”

A necklace and simple piece of parchment? Ginny wondered without breaking eye contact.

“But I have faith that you will do the right thing with my gifts,” she said seriously. “After you check them for spells and curses.”

At that, Ginny couldn’t help but smile, however briefly. “Why would you trust me? I’m certainly not a hero.”

“Neither am I,” the dark-haired woman said, shrugging lightly and gracefully and looking fragile. “But I had a friend who was, and the people on that list owe her and her son a debt that he can collect, if you let him know it.”

“You’re avoiding answering me question about why you would trust me when I’m such an anomaly,” Ginny said bluntly, tapping the parchment against her leg.

“Because Gertrude told me I could,” Samantha said.

Ginny couldn't accept that. "Theo told me the Nott family motto: if you're doing something for just one reason, that's the reason not to do it."

Something in Mrs. Nott's eyes lit up. "And that's my second reason."

"Being shady?"

"Because my son doesn't let people in easily, and yet you've become his closest confidante in less than a year," the dark-eyed woman said. "I trust his judgment and believe you wouldn't do anything to harm him."

The wind was steady and biting, and there was a thin layer of snow on the bank of the ice that glinted in the setting sunlight as Ginny slowly let herself nod.

"I don't know where Harry is," she said, "but if I see him again"—when I see him again, she promised herself—"I'll let him know."

Samantha Nott inclined her head before squaring her shoulders and walking off the ice, leaving Ginny to follow. "Here's your Portkey. Have a safe trip."

It was a small book titled *Chasing the Chaser: the Greatest Quidditch Legends*, which Ginny hesitated just a moment before finally taking.

That night, Ginny found herself back in the library at Hogwarts, flipping through the pages of the old yearbook she and Harry and Andy had found the year before. In the cold quiet room, she sat staring at the portrait of children whom war would bend and twist and sharpen into legends. She looked at Lily Evans laughing with her best mate Samantha Caldwell, and at Gertrude Wrightman, so confident even in photos that it practically jumped off the page. She saw Sirius Black's sneaky grin and James Potter's dancing eyes. She saw Peter Pettigrew whispering something to Remus Lupin, who smiled tiredly. She saw Severus Snape there, too, and Andy's aunt Tracy.

But it was Mrs. Nott she kept returning to, this strange enigma of a woman, who was smart and hid it, beautiful and flaunted it, strong and pretending not to be. The young mother who had taken her son to Ballycat Quidditch matches every Saturday when he was a child and smiled brightly at his joy. The older, refined woman who stood on the ice in her black high heels, quiet and powerful and willing the world to change around her.

“How was the funeral?” Andy asked the next morning as they walked to breakfast through the nearly-empty corridor. Nadine shook her head at him as if to indicate how dumb the question was.

“Sad,” Ginny said honestly, shrugging.

“Moron,” Nadine muttered at Andy.

“Actually,” Ginny said, shrugging, “it was nice to see Juliette and Demetrius again.”

Andy nodded as Nadine took his hand and asked her, “And how’d you like Theo’s mum?”

The question took her by surprise. “What?”

“Meeting your boyfriend’s mother had to be stressful,” Nadine said, nodding for Ginny to spill the gossip. Andy looked just as interested, truth be told.

“Oh. Yeah. She... surprised me,” Ginny said carefully, fingering the necklace and list in her pocket.

“Were you expecting a Death Eater?” Andy asked as they descended the stairs, and Ginny shrugged.

“I don’t know what I was expecting.” But it wasn’t someone who stood on ice to tell the truth.

Nadine swung her hand in Andy’s as she said, “Mrs. Nott loves Theo, and Theo loves her, but you have to expect the lowest common denominator there.”

“What does that mean?” Ginny could guess, but she wanted it said plainly.

“It’s something my uncle Will always says. Muggle math or something,” Andy said. “It just means that you have to accept Mrs. Nott as she is, I think.”

“I guess,” Ginny said, and the subject was dropped as they entered the Great Hall. The student population had dwindled to about half of what it had been the year before, and most students sat in clumps at their house table having whispered conversations.

Oddly, neither Snape nor the female Carrow were in their usual seats glaring at the students. The male Carrow was there, though, eating eggs and ham and looking incredibly smug.

At the end of the meal, Theo showed up beside her and asked, “Where did you go yesterday?”

It took Ginny a moment to understand the question. “After the funeral? I went to talk to the children. You saw me.”

“Not that,” he said testily. “Why did you leave without me?”

“You left before me,” Ginny said obviously.

“I did not. I was waiting for you to finish talking with the family when my mother let me know that she had seen you leave,” he said, standing in front of her with his arms crossed. Devon stood quietly beside him, not appearing to care too much about the conversation.

In a flash, Ginny realized that Mrs. Nott must have lied to Ginny about everyone having left already in order to make sure they could talk alone. How sad that she hadn’t thought her own son should be a part of that conversation. Or how sad that she thought he wouldn’t listen or trust her.

"I was caught up talking to people, and I thought you had already left. I must have been mistaken," Ginny said smoothly, but she noticed Devon's disbelieving glance. "Sorry."

"Fine," Theo said, turning to Andy. "Ready to work with the cubs?"

"I'm not studying with you when you're this cranky," Andy said, standing.

"I will," Nadine piped up with a smile as she stood, pulling her hair into a ponytail.

"Traitor," Andy muttered.

Theo smiled one of his rare, genuine smiles. "It's not her fault I'm better looking than you."

"That's doesn't even make any sense within the context of this conversation," Andy said as they began to walk away.

"And it's a lie," Nadine said, surprising both boys and inciting a good-natured round of jokes.

"I sometimes think I must have been a moron not to know how close they all were a year ago," Ginny said to Devon as she stood, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

"I'd have to agree," Devon said. Ginny wondered if she had learned that superior smirk from Theo or he from her.

"Hey Ginny," Neville said, rushing up to her only to hesitate once he saw Devon.

"Hey Neville. How are you?" Their escapades together had made the year bearable. Despite having been covered with dark cloths now, the hourglasses they had charmed could still be heard whenever anyone gave or took points, which made her grin like a fool.

"I heard something I want to tell you."

When he didn't go on to tell her the important thing, Ginny slowly prodded: "Yes?"

"It's just something..." The tall bloke wasn't normally this vague. In fact, over the course of the year, he'd become so assertive that Ginny had thought to check him for Confidence Potions. So she expected him to just say whatever it was, no matter who was listening, but then his eyes shifted to Devon and he shut his mouth tightly. Odd. "I'll tell you later."

"Alright." Maybe it was about the Muggleborns he had sneaked out so secretly, or the plans Ginny and he had begun surrounding unseating Snape. Whatever it was, Neville clearly didn't want Devon to know.

"Find me later." He rushed off, a swirl of color and energy. The person he had become still surprised her.

"Well," Ginny said, turning back to her Slytherin friend, prepared to ignore the strange interruption.

"My cousin tried to murder his parents. I wouldn't trust me either," Devon said easily, leading Ginny out of the large public room.

"You're related to the Lestranges?" Ginny asked as her eyes adjusted to the darker corridors.

Devon nodded, her soft, shiny hair pushed away from her face. "Not the best side of my family."

"Not the best in any family, hopefully," Ginny said, trying to imagine Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband sitting at the family table at Christmas.

"Actually, my favorite cousin Draco isn't at breakfast today, much like Professors Snape and Carrow," Devon said, keeping her eyes steadily in front of them while Ginny paused to think back over the room they had just left. "It makes you wonder what could have been so important, doesn't it?"

“What do you think is going on?” Ginny asked, thinking of her parents and brothers all over the country and knowing that Devon never made idle conversation.

“I don’t know,” Devon said, shrugging and truly seeming not to care.

“Ginny!” a voice cried out so loudly that Ginny jumped.

“Are you okay?” Devon asked, looking very concerned as she stopped.

“Didn’t you hear that?” Ginny asked as the voice screamed her name again, so loudly that Ginny’s ears rang.

Devon looked unsettled. “Hear what?”

“My name. Someone’s—”

“Ginny, the mirror! Look at the mirror!”

Her hand flashed into her left robe pocket, where she always kept a little mirror that Harry had given her and she pulled it out only to see a bloody Harry Potter looking at her in the tiny space, a bruise on his cheek and trail of blood over one eye.

“Oh,” she whispered, her long fingers curled around the metal frame.

He brushed the back of his hand over his forehead and smeared the blood. “There’s been an attack and—”

“That’s an interesting mirror,” Devon said, eyeing the intricate frame.

“It is, isn’t it? Let’s me know when I should clean myself up,” Ginny said with a quick, fake grin. “I’m going to do something about my hair. I’ll see you later, okay?”

The smaller brown-haired girl nodded again, her light blue eyes amused. “We also have to plan for the next Dark Arts class.”



“Sure.” That’s probably what Neville wanted, Ginny thought as she walked calmly away, not anxious to ramp up suspicion in the eyes of those students milling around. So with purposeful steps she made her way to an empty classroom and sealed it with as many Charms as she could before she finally spoke to Harry.

“What happened?” Ginny asked, scanning his face.

Harry shook his head, calmer but constantly glancing to his right, his face still dirty with soot and blood and bruises. He didn’t even seem to notice. “Spinner’s End is gone.”

“What?” Harry’s home. The house that she had fixed up with her brother and Mundungus and the house elves. The house she had adored with her clean little room. The Quidditch pitch. The stunning view down to the beach and steep white cliffs and the ocean breaking just close enough to hear. Gone. “How?”

“I don’t know. Death Eaters just attacked. Hermione thought it must have been one of the people invited to my birthday party because of the Fidelius Charm.” His voice was laced with guilt as he talked about his first real party, and Ginny mentally went through the guests; there wasn’t one she didn’t like. “I don’t think the Death Eaters expected to find us there, really. They burned the whole house, and we just barely escaped.”

“Where are you? Are you okay?” Ginny asked, pushing aside her other emotions.

“We’re at Snuffle’s place,” Harry said shortly, wiping the new trail of blood away from his forehead as a muscle in his jaw twitched. “We need a Healer. Hermione was hurt.”

Crap. Of course it was Hermione, the only one who had actually taken the time to learn Healing spells for their stupid, exclusive adventure.

“Okay,” Ginny said, nodding to herself as she began to think of a solution.

“I thought,” Harry said, “since you Healed my shoulder last Christmas— Well, you told me about your project with McGonagall to study Healing...”

A stab went through her. “I’m not trained to help with anything more than bones, really. I changed the project and—”

“Oh.” He nodded. “I’ll have to think of something else.”

“How badly hurt is she?” Ginny asked, images of torture victims coming unbidden to her mind.

He glanced over his shoulder. “Very.”

“Alright. I’ll figure something out. I’ll bring you a Healer,” Ginny said, turning off the little mirror and shoving it in her pocket. She needed time to think and plan. Luckily, pressure didn’t bother Ginny; it only made her sharper, more focused.

Where could she find a Healer? And one that she trusted, too. Charlie knew field medicine, but he was in Romania and international travel was being strictly monitored. She didn’t know where Bill was, and her mother, who was probably the best option since she was good at healing and knew about Grimmauld Place, had to be immediately discounted. Not only was she being watched, but she also wasn’t the best person in a tense situation, and her fury with the Trio for leaving hadn’t entirely abated. Once she saw them, Ginny didn’t know if she’d let them go again.

So who?

Well, Ginny knew one option, and quickly made her way to McGonagall’s office.

After the new portrait guarding the office begrudgingly let Ginny in (saying that her robes and age barely qualified her for time with the Head of Gryffindor), the older woman rose from her desk.

“How was your practice?” McGonagall asked, nodding significantly toward the entrance to the newly installed portrait that served as her door.

“I mastered the spell,” Ginny said, snatching a blank sheet of parchment from McGonagall’s desk and a spare quill. “Want to see?”

“Yes,” McGonagall said emphatically.

They need a Healer, Ginny wrote. Can Pomfrey be trusted?

She can’t leave the grounds. She’s being tracked for something like this, McGonagall wrote back quickly, surprising Ginny, who had been counting on being able to use the school nurse. Who else did she know with the right skills? Fleur had some training, but again she was an international Floo call, and with the current restrictions... The twins knew basic mending spells, but she had no idea where they were.

Our Healer at St. Mungo’s was taken in for questioning, too, McGonagall wrote. Severus knew all of our contacts. I’m the best option, and I can’t leave the school.

They can’t come here, Ginny wrote, trying to piece together the best way to help Hermione. Maybe she should have studied Healing more extensively, she thought, but quickly batted that train of thought away. It was no use to ponder what she should have done. She needed to focus.

As she was considering the possibility of finding the Polyjuice Potion she knew Professor Miercoles had stashed away somewhere and pretending to be McGonagall while she left to help Hermione, she shoved a hand in her pocket and encountered the parchment still there from yesterday, and had a flash of inspiration. Maybe it wasn’t the best plan, but at least it was feasible.

I know someone we can use, but I’ll have to leave the grounds for a while.

I’ll tell them you’re ill in your room. Miss Ryan will help, McGonagall wrote. Be safe.

“Well done with your silent spell work,” McGonagall said in her most aloof voice. “But you’re looking a little ill.”

“I am feeling a little sick. Maybe I’ll go lie down,” Ginny said, seething that her head of house had been turned into a sneak in her own castle. In Hogwarts.

“I hope you feel better by tomorrow. I wouldn’t want you to miss class,” McGonagall said, and Ginny left, pushing open the large, dark painting that spied on McGonagall with enough effort to make it really bang into the wall. Traitor.

Feigning illness as she made her way through the busiest corridors, the castle, Ginny kept scanning the students until she found the one she most needed standing outside the Trophy Room talking to a seventh year.

“Hey Devon,” Ginny said, when there was a break in the conversation. Both girls turned to her, but Ginny focused on her friend. “Can we work on Potions now?”

Devon took a moment before nodding and saying a polite goodbye.

It wasn’t until they were fairly isolated, that Ginny quietly asked, “What’s Theo’s Floo address?”

“Alabane’s Castle, password Ox,” Devon said just as quietly. “Why?”

“I just needed to know,” Ginny said, feeling like a jerk.

“Are you going to visit him or something?” Devon asked, looking dubious. “Because that would be a very bad idea.”

“Why?” Ginny asked sarcastically. “Just because his dad tried to attack my friend?”

“I just wanted to make sure you hadn’t forgotten.”

“I haven’t. But thanks,” Ginny said and kept on walking. After a quick detour to her room to collect a few things, she made her way toward the statue of the one-eyed witch that led her to the secret passage to Hogsmeade.

Once in the little town, where many shops had closed and most patrons had left, she Transfigured her hair a dark brown color, hid her school crest, and weaved through the streets to the nearest shady Floo, where they didn’t ask the normal questions, and bought passage one-way.

It was a stupid plan, she thought as she twisted through the green fire and smoke, elbows tucked neatly against her sides. She didn’t really know Mrs. Nott, but the woman had been a trained Healer, if Ginny had heard correctly, and she seemed to want to make amends and take care of Harry. At the very least she could know someone who could help.

Of course, that all could have been an elaborate ruse to trick Ginny into trusting her, but Ginny was already on her way and couldn’t change course now. Besides, Wrightman had trusted Mrs. Nott; she’d even told Ginny once that Mrs. Nott was a good woman trapped by decade old choices.

And Hermione needed help.

Ginny jumped out at a dark grey hearth and landed on a stone floor in a dark room, where the window showed the bright sky. They were clearly in the south.

It hadn’t occurred to Ginny to wonder whether anyone might be home, or if Mrs. Nott wouldn’t be there. If she wasn’t—

“Miss Weasley?” Mrs. Nott asked, sweeping into the room hurriedly. “You used my password.”

“Devon gave it to me,” Ginny said quietly, tracing fiery words through the air to ask, Where can we talk?

“Here. Monitoring spells can’t be used in this home,” Mrs. Nott said. “And my husband stripped the room of portraits for privacy.”

“My friend is hurt, and she needs a Healer.”

“She?”

“Please. She’s hurt, and you told me you wanted to help,” Ginny said, thinking of the many long minutes it had been since Harry first contacted her.

“I’m not qualified,” she said, shaking her head.

“I didn’t think you were,” Ginny said, pulling out the parchment from her pocket. “But one of these people must be.”

Sam’s eyes darted between the parchment and Ginny. “I can’t—”

“What’s the point of offering help yesterday if you won’t even—”

“Oh, Merlin.” Mrs. Nott’s pretty brown eyes widened as she pulled out an old fashioned pocket watch.

A jolt of worry coursed through Ginny. “What?”

“Hide!” Samantha whispered, hurrying to open a hidden panel in the wall and ushering Ginny inside, closing her in so that there was only a crack through which to watch the room.

“Samantha,” came the strong, low voice of Mr. Nott as he entered the room, full of pomp and confidence.

“I’m here, Iago,” Samantha said, sounding completely calm, maybe even bored.

“Are you planning to go somewhere?” he asked.

“No. Why?” She sounded vacant.

Her husband, an older man with dull eyes and a mean mouth, seemed to make a great effort not to roll his eyes. "The Floo is in here. I wanted to know if you were going anywhere."

"Why would I want to go somewhere?"

"I don't know. To shop?"

"But I have the house-elves to do that," she said, sounding still confused. It was absolutely ridiculous how dumb she managed to sound, and her husband gave up the effort.

"Never mind." He settled in at the desk across the room, and Ginny could feel the seconds passing. "Tell me about Wrightman's funeral. You hardly said anything last night."

"It was lovely," Samantha said.

"I'm sure it was," he said, eyes locked on the Floo as if waiting for someone. "I heard you brought the Weasley girl."

"She's nice," Samantha said simply.

"You shouldn't undermine Snape like that, taking her out of his care," Mr. Nott said, his hands in his pockets, resting on his heels like Theo when he was bored.

Mrs. Nott flipped open a book she took off the shelf. "I asked him if I could take her."

"Yes," he said, twisting his head toward his much-younger wife, "but the fact that she was with him when you went to tell her the news suggests that you should have let the matter rest."

"I didn't go to tell her the news," she said, closing the book. "I went to see Theo, and then I went to meet his girlfriend and a portrait told me she was in the Headmaster's office and since I knew Severus from our time in school, I thought it would be okay."

He turned back to the flames. "Don't cross that man."

"Alright," Mrs. Nott said, settling into a chair just as the fire flared and a large, dark man stepped out, pulling off his hood to reveal Fenrir Greyback. Ginny stilled and silently cast a spell to block her smell. This could not be any worse.

"I have news," the man growled.

"Come with me," the older man said, motioning toward the doorway.

"Perhaps I will go out to shop," Mrs. Nott said, and her husband waved a hand dismissively before both they turned the corner and disappeared from sight. She cast three spells at the closed door before opening the panel to let Ginny out.

"What was that about?" Ginny asked.

"I don't know. Something happened this morning, and we need to get you out of here before the house-elves see you." Samantha grabbed a purse from the table, summoning two things that rushed into the room which she snatched out of the air.

Ginny shook her head. "I need a Healer."

"I have one in mind," she said, handing her a bowl of Floo powder. "Follow me to Astra's House."

Ginny grabbed her arm. "I'm taking a huge risk trusting you."

"I know," Samantha said sincerely, her eyes so full of confidence that Ginny nodded and surrendered herself to trusting this woman, despite having almost no reason to do so. Later, thinking back on this hectic day, Ginny would wonder what led her to the Nott home instead of anywhere else, and the only answer she could give was that she had no other options.

Spinning through the green Floo network for the second time that day, Ginny could only hope that she hadn't done the wrong thing.



The fire spit her out into a comfortable, cozy living room with a large desk in the corner.

“Where are we?” Ginny asked, realizing that she should have asked it before.

“My private residence. My husband knows about it, so we can’t stay, but it’s better to contact the Healer from here,” Sam said, twisting to toss a puff of Floo powder into the fire. “The Fireside.”

“Who is he?” Ginny asked, uncomfortable already not being in control.

“My brother. The head of St. Mungo’s Children’s Ward,” Mrs. Nott said, looking unruffled despite the speed of their journey.

“Won’t he be at work?”

“It’s Sunday,” Mrs. Nott reminded her as a head poked out of the fire that Ginny instantly recognized as Theo’s Uncle Chad. How stupid that she hadn’t realized that it would be him.

“Sam?” he asked, sounding surprised.

“Chad, I need your help,” Mrs. Nott said in her serious tone.

He glanced at Ginny, who imagined she looked pretty gross from all the travel. “Now?”

“Yes. Please.”

In Snape’s office, Ginny had wondered at her professor’s ability to deny this beautiful woman any request. Watching her brother struggle between curiosity and agreement, Ginny once again marveled at Mrs. Nott’s easy ability to control others with nothing more than a whispered ‘please.’

Then Chad Caldwell nodded. “What do you need?”

“Can we discuss it there?” Sam asked, glancing around. He nodded, and Ginny stepped through the fire for the third time that day, gnawing worry in her gut.

The house she stepped into was small and warm with dark colors and large pillows on the couch that looked well worn. Everything was very masculine.

“Welcome,” Chad said, standing in front of them like a solid wall. For such a slight man, Ginny was surprised that he reminded her of Alastor Moody right then. A strange comparison since this man had a boyish face with smooth skin and pretty brown eyes that looked just like Mrs. Nott’s. The resemblance between them was strong, and Ginny found herself absently thinking that it was no wonder that Theo was attractive.

“Chad, this is Ginny Weasley,” Samantha said, holding out her graceful hand toward Ginny.

Chad nodded. “We’ve met.”

“Hello again, Mr. Caldwell.”

“She has a friend in need of a Healer,” Samantha went on, and Chad’s eyes snapped to his sister and then Ginny.

“Is it Theo? Is he alright?” Mr. Caldwell asked, taking a step forward.

“No, no. Theo’s fine,” Ginny quickly assured him, hands up. “It’s someone else. Someone not at Hogwarts.”

The man’s intelligent eyes flashed before he turned to his sister. “I won’t be involved in something that aids the You-Know-Who.”

“I know,” Samantha said seriously. “Do you think this girl would?”

“I think she could be any number of people using any number of spells to conceal her true identity,” Caldwell said reasonably.

Ginny took a step. “Test me. Ask me something.”

"I know nothing about you."

"Who came with you to the Quidditch game?" Ginny asked quickly, prompting him.

"Andy, Tracy, Colleen, Michael, and Matt," Chad said, nodding to himself. "What was the story Matt told?"

"About Mr. and Mrs. Potter's Polyjuice adventures," Ginny said quickly, wishing she could prove herself and him more completely, but knowing there probably wasn't time. "I know we don't know a lot about each other, but Professor Wrightman told me that Samantha was a good person. So I'm trusting her, and now you; I know that I wouldn't have been asked to find a Healer for my friend unless she really needed it, so I am willing to take a few chances on the mother of someone I respect and a man my best friend considers an uncle."

Mr. Caldwell wasn't a very tall man, but his confidence and air of authority made him seem bigger than he was. Everything about him seemed calm and controlled, so she was a little surprised when he suddenly flicked his wand and a bag of what Ginny assumed were Potions zoomed into the room.

Later, when this day was over and she really had time to think about her decision-making process, Ginny would have more than a few critiques about her own behavior. But trusting Chad Caldwell wasn't really one of them.

"How can we go to your friend?" Chad Caldwell asked, holding his bag tightly.

"First I need both of you to take Unbreakable Vows that you won't reveal the location to anyone else, nor mention the people you find there."

The Vow took some negotiation, but was eventually completed by Caldwell.

"It doesn't matter if I make that promise," Mrs. Nott said. "I'm not going with you."

"Yes, you are," Ginny said, pulling a piece of gum out of her pocket.

"I would compromise the location," she said.

Ginny tossed her the gum, which she caught awkwardly in her cupped hands. "Did you really think that I would have come to you for help if I didn't know how to nullify your tracking spell?"

Chad's eyes narrowed. "Tracking spell?"

Samantha met his eyes, but did not answer.

"Chew that," Ginny said, nodding at the candy. The older woman looked dubious. "My brothers invented them to throw off the underage magic trackers. Your husband's isn't stronger than that."

"It's impossible to throw off the underage—"

"My brothers are desperate geniuses, and it's my risk to take," Ginny said, and the woman chewed the gum and made the Vow. Then Ginny made them both touch the bronze coin that she had been given by Sirius in the case of an emergency and she said the password quietly: Safe Haven.

They landed in the study on the second floor, and Samantha grabbed Ginny's elbow to steady her before Ginny rushed through the door and yelled for Harry and she raced across the hardwood floors, keeping Chad and Samantha in sight.

"Ginny?" His voice twisted up the dark stairs.

Harry tensed and drew his wand when he saw the three of them descend on the stairs. "Who are these people?"

Moving to stand in front of the adults, Ginny blocked his aim. "They're here to help. You remember Chad Caldwell from the Quidditch game? He came with the McGraths?"

Harry did not lower his wand. "Ginny, what's the word I associate with you?"

Word? She thought a moment until it dawned on her. "Domus."

The nod was slight. "I don't have a question for them."

"I've tested them," she assured him. "And they've taken a Vow of secrecy and aid. They can't hurt anyone in this house without terrible consequences."

That got a reaction: wide eyes filled with incredulity. "Why did you bring them?"

"You said you needed a Healer." She pointed at Chad Caldwell. "He's a Healer."

Harry shook his head. "I won't let someone I don't know mess around with Hermione."

"Harry, you can be there the whole time, but if your friend is hurt, I'd like to see her now," Chad said calmly.

Seeing his hesitation, Ginny had to ask, "What other option do you have?"

It was like a damn of anger sprouted up. "Right. Fine. Let's go. Ginny, watch them."

She lifted her wand. "Always."

Hermione was lying on the old couch Mrs. Weasley had cleaned so thoroughly two summers before. Oddly, Kreacher was standing guard over her with a wet towel in his bony fingers. His large eyes turned to the newcomers.

"It's alright, Kreacher. They're friends," Harry said softly. When had this relationship changed?

“Master and Mistress Caldwell,” he said happily, his ears bouncing. “My mistress would be most pleased to see you.”

“I need to look at the girl’s injuries,” Chad said, stepping forward.

The elf waved a finger and a spell hit him. “Master Caldwell will protect her.”

“Kreacher, please go fix us some tea,” Harry said, and the elf popped out. At Ginny’s questioning look, Harry shook his head. “Turns out Hermione was right about just being nice to him.”

Then, for the first time, Ginny got a really good look at Hermione. Laying prone on the couch, pale and sweaty, she looked horrific. Her whole left arm was black, and the veins in her shoulder bore the same obsidian color, as if it were oozing through her veins toward her core. Her head tilted to the left as if to escaping the flow.

“What happened?” Chad asked, rushing to kneel beside where she lay on the couch.

“A Death Eater hit her with a spell, she blocked it partially but--“ Harry shook his head. “It was just to her elbow this morning, and then it started growing.”

“I can see that,” Chad said, running his wand along the length of her body. “She halted the growth tremendously.”

“Can you save her?” The raw emotion in Harry’s voice seeped into the room.

“I’m going to try,” Chad said, looking up at the Boy-Who-Lived. Ginny wondered for a moment what he saw in the seventeen-year-old who met his gaze.

“It’s Corinsillia,” Ginny said, and all three others turned to her. “That’s the spell they used on her. It’s designed to block magic.”

“And it’s spreading,” Sam said, turning back to the girl on the couch.

"If it is Corinsillia, I can redirect it," Chad said, slowly dragging his eyes away from Ginny and to the patient. "I've seen a case done like that, but it was much smaller. This is going to take a lot of time, and it will take her an even longer time to heal."

"That's fine," Harry declared. "As long as she gets better."

Chad nodded and went to work, kneeling beside her and leaving Ginny to ask Harry, "Where's Ron? Is he okay?"

Harry nodded. "He's with your parents, I think."

"You think?"

"It's a long story." He sounded exhausted and drained. "I'll tell you later."

"We need something to channel the energy into," Chad said, turning back to them. "Something with dark magic, and I'll need you to watch her vitals, make sure her heart keeps beating. The stronger the better. It'll help the process."

Harry summoned a book from the locked cabinet that Ginny's mother hadn't known about when they were cleaning the room, and held it out to Chad, who took it with a quick glance and nod. And then he set to work.

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Probably because of her focus wondering about Ron and Hermione and Kreacher, it took Ginny nearly a full minute to realize that Samantha Nott had left the room. It took her less than seven seconds to find her, however, standing in the entrance area by the silent portrait Mrs. Black, the tips of her manicured nails brushing against the frame. For the first time in Ginny's memory, Mrs. Black wasn't screaming (or trying to now that she made no sound).

"Mrs. Nott, what are you doing out here?" Ginny asked, keeping her eyes away from the figure on the wall.

Samantha calmly looked over. "Were you worried that I left?"

"Maybe," Ginny admitted, not wanting to stand anywhere near this spot in the house.

"I remember this painting," Samantha said. "My mother always said it was tactless to put up a portrait of yourself in your home, but Mrs. Black liked the idea of legacy."

I'm your guide, Mrs. Black had whispered in the terrifying dreams that came to Ginny last year. You're powerful. It wasn't a memory Ginny wanted, and she tried not to think about it, but the last haunting question stayed with her: Didn't you find it odd, Ginevra of the Light Weasleys, that you couldn't manage the Patronus Charm for a year but the Unforgivables come as easily as breathing?

"She yelled a lot about Blood-traitors and other nasty things before the portrait was silenced," Ginny said, speaking over her own crashing thoughts.

"Walburga Black was never the nicest woman."

Understatement, Ginny thought as she remembered the Unforgivables she cast in her dream while the woman egged her on.

"Why did you insist that I join you here?" Mrs. Nott asked, turning her large brown eyes on Ginny.

"Because it's smarter to keep potential threats in front of you instead of leaving them behind," Ginny admitted exhaustedly, rubbing her arms to keep out the cold that still seemed to permeate the now-brighter house.

Fortunately, Mrs. Nott wasn't exactly sensitive. "Clever."

Ginny shrugged. "The gum only lasts seventy-seven minutes, by the way. Then you'll have to leave."

Ruefully shaking her head, Samantha asked lightly, "And where will I say I have been? Ice skating?"



Ginny smiled. "The gum doesn't make you disappear, it makes the tracking stay wherever you first chewed it."

"So my husband will think I spend nearly two hours at my brother's home?" Samantha said, her eyebrows raised. "That will be more difficult to explain."

That seemed hard to imagine. "Why?"

"Years of history," Samantha said with a wave of her hand. "Perhaps he will have been too distracted by the news of this attack to have checked on me."

The door to the study slid open, and they spun to face Chad Caldwell; he looked tired as he wiped his hand on a nice, white towel that he then gave back to Kreacher, who disappeared.

"The worst of it's gone," he said, "but as I told Harry, it's going to take another couple of weeks for her to fully recover and I'm going to have to do more work, and I can't do it here."

"Why not?" Ginny asked.

He glanced around the entrance. "The Dark Magic in this house will tear at that wound."

Despite having Winky and Dobby clean, Grimmauld Place still had that much Dark Magic? Ginny thought of the places they could go. Her brothers all had houses. They might have to go to one of them.

"Ideally," Chad said, as if reading her thoughts, "she would recover in a non-magical setting. I heard her parents are Muggles, but Harry said that wasn't an option, so I wanted to know if either of you had any ideas."

"No," Ginny said honestly, the emotional drain of the last two days catching up with her.

A quiet wind swept through the room, a remnant of the magic that would hurt Hermione the longer she stayed there. It wasn't fair to lose another safe house so quickly.

"I have a place they can go," Samantha said slowly.

"Where?" Ginny asked.

"An old friend of mine lives in the Muggle world now."

"Someone else on your list?" She yanked the parchment out of her pocket as her friend's mother nodded.

"Tracy Merton."

That did nothing to endear Mrs. Nott to her. "That woman was vile."

"You've met her?"

"She came to the Quidditch game." Talked to Mr. McGrath and tried to convince him to keep Ginny's best mate away from her. Ginny wouldn't ever forget her.

"She can be trusted with this," Samantha said confidently.

Ginny scoffed. "I saw her on your list. It was half the reason I doubted the rest of those names. Actually, now that we're talking about it, I have to tell you that I think you're a bit mad to imagine that all those people are undyingly loyal to Harry."

"They owe him. They knew his mother," Sam Nott said.

"Half the people on this list are in the most important families in the wizarding world," Ginny said. "They aren't the types to owe anyone favors."

"They're the types to repay old debts in full," the older woman said, patient and straightforward, without a waver in her smooth voice. "Even if it must be to the son."

Ginny decided not to argue the issue anymore. She could make her own decisions about these people later. Right now, Hermione needed a safe place to go, and a Muggle motel wasn't going to cut it.

Chad surprised Ginny by asking his sister, "Why are you involved in all this?"

She failed in her attempt to give a sad smile. "Because I want to be."

"What about—" He shook his head, eyes steadily on his sister. "What about everything else?"

This 'everything else' sounded like the same kind of 'years of history' that Mrs. Nott mentioned earlier. Samantha's eyes cut over to the doorway, through which they could see Harry sitting beside his friend.

"I grew tired of living in my self-made shadows," she said, nodding to herself before turning back to her brother, "and he's a good boy."

Her brother smiled softly at her, tired and proud. They reminded Ginny of her and Percy during their fight two Christmases ago at the Ministry, not from when they were yelling, but the quiet aftermath. They had really heard and saw one another, and remembered that this was their family, their old best friend and hero.

"The gum's magic is wearing off; I have to go home now," Sam said at last, jolting all three out of the moment.

"No, you don't," Chad said, as if the reason why it was necessary weren't perfectly obvious from the sparkling ring on her finger that tied her to a husband who had Fenrir Greyback over for tea.

"Chad," Mrs. Nott said softly. "I need to."

Sounding much younger, he asked, "Why? He's evil."

Samantha's mouth closed for a moment, and she looked sad and thoughtful. "He's been a good father, and a good husband. The best he could be, at least. I know that's not enough to make him a good man, but he'll protect his son."

"Theo can take care of himself," Ginny said.

"I know," Sam replied, her brown eyes resting on the silent portrait. "I just don't want him to have to."

Well, that certainly was not what Ginny had expected her to say.

"Miss Weasley, could I talk to my brother for a moment?" Mrs. Nott asked.

"Sure," Ginny said, walking past them and into the room with Harry and Hermione.

Harry looked up from his place beside his best friend. "You left them alone."

She pulled a pair of Extendable Ears out of her pocket and tossed them to him. "Feel free to listen."

He studied the Ears in his hands. "No. I think I have to trust them."

"Just as well. Their Vows would kill them if they betrayed us," Ginny said, sitting beside him and wrapping her arms around his middle as he embraced her. "I'm glad you're okay."

"You, too."

"You look better now." She twisted around to look up at him, still firmly in his arms.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Thank Kreacher for that. He fusses."

"How inconsiderate of him," she joked.

He held her a little tighter. "I'm glad you're here."

Mrs. Nott and her brother left a short while later, the latter having explained how to contact him if Hermione's state drastically changed.

"I can take care of her," Harry said, standing like one of the stiff toy soldiers that Charlie and Bill used to own when they were children.

The Healer nodded. "And you'll need to move her after tomorrow, when she wakes."

"I'll come by, then, with Miss Weasley," Samantha said. "And help you hide somewhere else."

Apparently, Harry didn't like having been left out of the loop. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"We took oaths to protect both your friend and you; You'd know it was a trick the moment we died in front of you," Mr. Caldwell said reasonably, but the discussion still hadn't gone very smoothly, and the siblings left shortly thereafter.

Ginny and Harry went back to sitting beside one another on the couch, too tired to talk about the plans to move that they both knew Harry wouldn't go along with.

"Thank you for bringing help," Harry said quietly after a few minutes, resting his cheek against the top of her head.

"I told you I would always help you," Ginny said quietly, for the house felt too loud to her, and the room too small.

"I just—I can't loose any more family," Harry said in his broken, tired voice as he watched the brown-haired girl lying on the adjacent couch.

Family, Ginny thought, his hands tightening over her stomach. Sister.

Not that long ago, Ginny had talked to Hermione about her career meeting, and the older girl said that it had been uninspiring because while she knew a thousand jobs that she would have liked, helping Harry in his war was the only thing she absolutely knew she was going to do.

For a brief, intense moment, Ginny was reminded of the loyalty in the Trio—the unwavering reliance and love—and pitied Tom Riddle for thinking he could defeat such a thing.